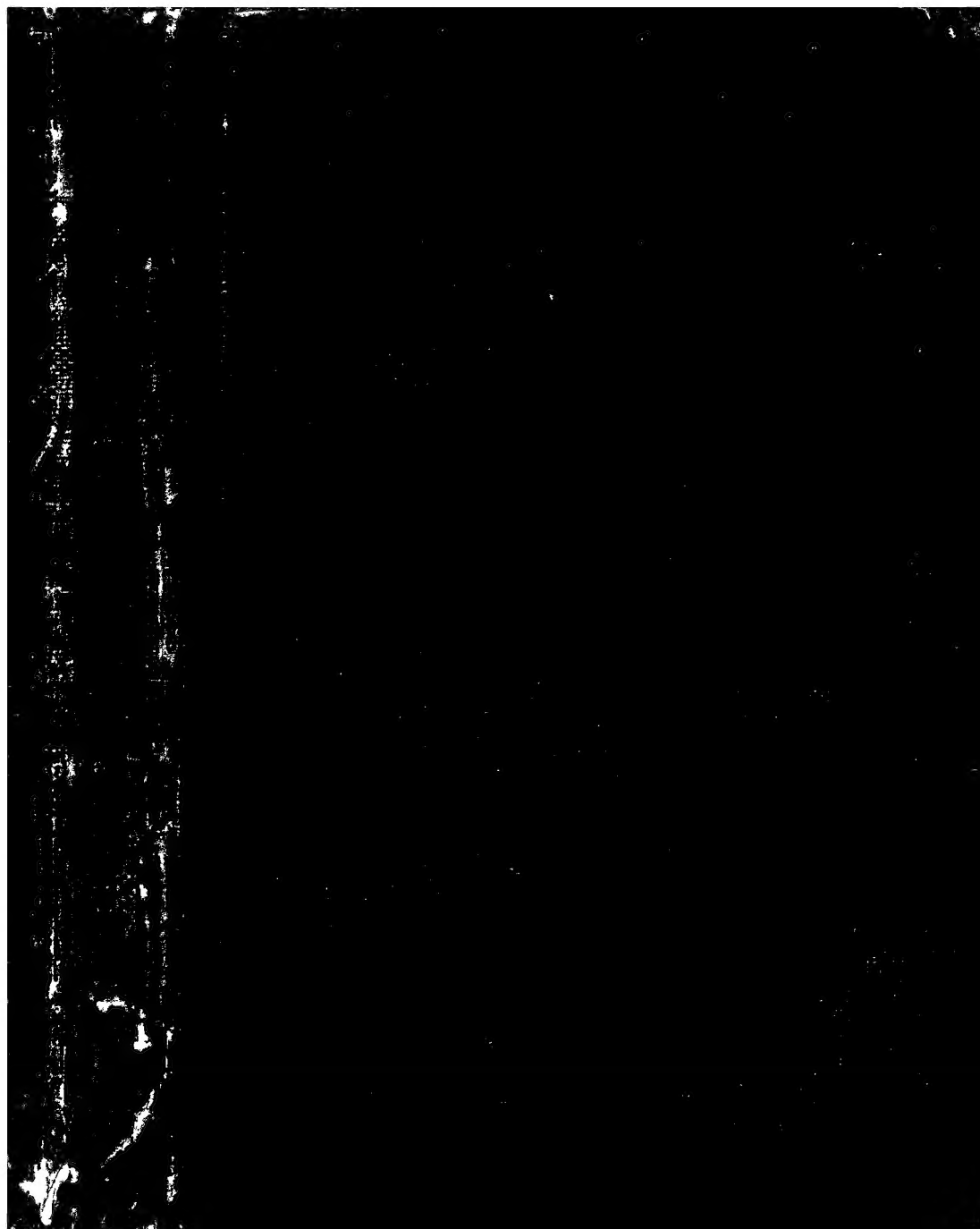






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*A STORY OF THE
NORTH WEST POLICE*

BY

GEORGE GOODCHILD

AUTHOR OF "TIGER'S CUB," "THE LAND OF ELDORADO,"
"COLORADO JIM," ETC., ETC

LONDON : ROBERT HAYES, LIMITED

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TROOPER O'NEILL

PROLOGUE

NEAR the "Forks" of the Saskatchewan river Angus McMahon ran a trading post. He built it himself, with the aid of three "breeds," during the summer of '84, and had lived there ever since. It was only a matter of five years, but to McMahon, who had left a wife and children in the Scotch highlands, it seemed more like five decades. He was typical of his class—a hard-headed trader, honest, good-natured up to a point, but relentless in his business bargaining, and without a trace of sentiment of any kind.

His sole object was to make money—to sell out at the most favourable moment, and to return to his beloved highland village, his wife and children, and all the things that really mattered. He failed to see anything in Canada, beyond the means to an end. Its beauty was utterly wasted on him. Conversely its hardships, its intense loneliness, its fierce and unremitting climate failed to have any effect upon him. Only his body dwelt there; his soul was four thousand miles away.

"Anither year," he murmured, "and I'll be back in my ain hills!"

Fortune had favoured him. The major portion of the trading between Fort Pitt and Cumberland went through his hands, for he was known and liked throughout the whole length of the northern Saskatchewan, and was credited with giving a "square deal."

From the window of the room behind the store McMahon could see the two great silent rivers, now locked in ice, merging into the single stream. Beyond them, to the north, stretched the great pine forest—five hundred miles of it—to end at the most desolate region of the earth, the home of the musk-ox, and the summer haunt of the reindeer.

Leaving the sullen Cree Indian to take care of the stores, McMahon settled himself before the red-hot stove, lighted a pipe, and lapsed into pleasant dreams of the homeland. The Indian, fully acquainted with his master's habits, did likewise. While McMahon dreamed of the bells of Edinburgh, that would shortly ring in the new year, the Cree was thinking of his tribe and of environments very different.

McMahon was awakened from his reverie by the sound of sleigh bells and the rhythm of a French chanson—a gay quick air that drifted across the deep snow and penetrated the chinks between the pine logs. He grunted with pleasure as he realised the close proximity of human beings, and hoped they might prove to be of Scotch origin which, in view of the song, he doubted. He entered the store, kicked the sleeping Cree into wakefulness, and lighted the oil lamps.

Two minutes later the tinkling of bells ceased, and

the song gave way to shouts, ejaculations, and curses. The curses were for the dogs, who understood only these and the crack of a whip. The door was flung open, and a huge figure burst in. It was a man of vast proportions, clad in a white bearskin coat, gumboots, woollen scarf and fox-skin cap. In his arms he carried a pile of "pelts"—fox, marmot, beaver, bear and sundry others. His two companions followed closely on his heels—French Canadians, garbed in the ubiquitous long blue overcoat, with capuchin hood and bound to the waist with a gaudy sash. They, too, carried skins—enough to make McMahon's eyes flash. The big man flung his pile on the counter.

"Ho, Sandy!" he cried in a tremendous voice. "So we come back again, eh?"

McMahon shook the immense hand that was shot across to him.

"I didn't expect you, Hans Christiansen. I thought, maybe, you were making a winter trip."

The giant Swede shook his enormous head. He and his two companions had beaten down the river late in the season to turn the peltry into hard cash, wherewith to make merry and forget their troubles. Why spend winter in the pitiless north when their luck had been good, and Eastward were towns, human beings, saloons—life?

"I trade you the skins," growled Christiansen, "then I make Saskatoon—yes." His face grew exceedingly fierce. "Maybe I find a man there—if so be, then I keel heem."

McMahon, sorting over the skins, did no more than give a cursory glance at Hans, to see whether he was

in earnest or merely boasting. He saw at once it was no boast. Christiansen's pale blue eyes were blazing with hate of someone.

"Killing's a dangerous game at Saskatoon," mused McMahon. "There's a Mounted Police station in the town."

Hans made a noise in his throat, and his hands gripped the edge of the counter as he jerked his head towards the occupied Scotsman.

"I keel heem where I find heem. There or here, it matter not. He is a dog !"

McMahon sighed. He had no doubt about the Swede. He had known him long enough to understand how little a human life counted with him—when he hated sufficiently. He was naturally a creature of passions. A very little drink, and those passions utterly controlled him. At any rate, it was no concern of McMahon's. He was utterly indifferent whether Hans killed his man or not. Killing was quite an everyday affair along the Saskatchewan in the "eighties." When the Crees were not killing their hereditary enemies, the Blackfeet, the Blackfeet were killing the Chipwayans, or infuriated settlers were killing both.

"I'll make you a price for the lot," said McMahon, pointing to the pile of skins, which he had carefully examined with an experienced eye.

"What you geev me ?"

"Two thousand dollars."

"The beavers and marmots alone are worth——"

"I'm bidding you chiefly for them," replied McMahon. "I canna deal with bear. Tak' it or leave it—two thousand."

Christiansen grunted, and spread out his hands in

acceptance, knowing that the man with whom he dealt, would not add a single dollar to the bid. The next trading post was a hundred miles distant, and he wanted to travel light, for his dogs were in poor condition and snow was coming. McMahon disappeared into the adjacent room, and came back with the money. He counted the notes into the Swede's open hand.

"Jules! Batouche!" cried Christiansen. "Take your share—five hundred each, and you haven't earned it. Hans Christiansen he did all the work. But for heem you earn noding."

He handed them their shares, and slapped the diminutive Batouche on the back with such force as to send him hurtling across the room. Then he guffawed, licked his cracked lips, and leered at McMahon in a way that was clear to that worthy.

"All right," he said. "But I've only got two bottles, and one is for mesel."

He shuffled into the next room and returned with a bottle of whisky and some tumblers. Christiansen's eyes gleamed as the spirit was poured out. He gulped down a tumbler of it—neat—and sighed. Batouche, in the meantime, had brought his violin from the sleigh outside. It accompanied him on all his wanderings and helped to relieve the monotony of sub-arctic nights. He tuned it, and began to play a wild dance, beating the time with his feet, and moving round in circles. Jules, equally susceptible to music, flung off his long blue coat, and commenced to dance. Their rather sullen moods vanished under the spell of the violin. Faster went the music, and faster went Jules' feet. Batouche still continued his

rhythmic circling, his head low on the instrument, and his eyes half-closed.

For half an hour nothing was heard but the wail of the violin and the interjections of Christiansen as he passed judgment on the airs. McMahon smoked away complacently, and watched the two Frenchmen dancing themselves into hysteria. When at last the fatigued Jules sat down on a barrel and mopped his brow Batouche, apparently indefatigable, changed the style of his music, and broke into a gay triumphant air, that echoed down the room, died and rose again in beautiful cadence.

"De *voyageur's* song," said Jules. "Jacques Cartier, he play dat song t'ree hundred-fifty year ago, all way to Hochelago—an dis de eve of de *jour de l'an*. Come Batouche, we drink to hees memory."

Batouche put down the fiddle, and the two shared the last drop of Christiansen's whisky. They raised their tumblers high, and with a cry of "Jacques Cartier" drank and shivered the glasses on the floor, much to McMahon's annoyance. Then, their blood being fired, they talked of the long ago—of Cartier, the Sieur de Roberval, and that gay company who unfurled the flag of the lilies in the Western world. They showed no reluctance in prognosticating the future—a future when Canada should again be a French colony. This was too much for Christiansen, who held his companions in contempt. He stood up and grabbed them both by the scruffs of their necks, flinging them violently towards the door.

"Feed der dawgs," he roared. "You mak' me

sick wid your Jacques Cartier and your Canader faders. Yah—you do noding but have children—children—children ! ”

The two Frenchmen glared at him, and fumbled with the knives in their belts, but Christiansen only laughed. He had done little else but laugh since he first fell in with them. They tolerated him only because he was the born hunter, and knew the habitant of every creature that had a skin to its back worth taking.

Christiansen was by this time well on the way to intoxication. He endeavoured to induce McMahon to trade him the second bottle of whisky, but the obdurate Scotsman was reserving that to drink in the New Year.

“It’d only mak’ you more drunk, mon,” he said. “Ye’ve no constitution for strong drink. Is there no other sma’ thing I can trade ye ? ”

“No—damn you. Yes there is—cartridges—aye, cartridges. I’ll be needing them down yonder.”

His face grew fierce as he remembered the threat he had made, and meant to carry out. He took the box of ammunition, filled his revolver, and dropped the rest into his side pocket.

“I’d have keelled him on Shell River if I hadn’t run out of bullets.”

Insensate hate was surging up in him again. The taciturn Scot, removed from such uncontrollable passions, stroked his ginger beard and shrugged his shoulders.

“Who is he ? ” he queried casually.

“Gorringe—the swine ! ”

McMahon’s complaisance vanished. He took the

pipe from his mouth, and stared at the murderous Swede.

"Not—Jackson Gorringe?"

Christiansen snarled as the hated name was mentioned.

"So!" mutter McMahon. "You think you are going to kill Gorringe. Mon, have a care. Gorringe is not a lad that is easily killed."

The Swede burst into a torrent of abuse. Gorringe was a dog and should die—yes, Hans Christiansen would kill him at sight—perforate him with holes that could never be healed, and then he should sleep for ever under the ice. His fury was demoniacal, manifested in every line of his face, in every part of his quivering body.

"I keel him where I find him," he raved. "He ran away at Shell River—run like a dog, but——"

McMahon stuck out his chin aggressively.

"Ye'll never tell me that. Gorringe has never run away from anything yet. If ye meet him, Hans, take care or it will be you who will sleep under the ice."

The effect of this was merely to increase the Swede's wrath. He banged the counter with his hands, until it shook and swore more furiously than ever in English, French and Swedish.

"Saskatoon," he snarled. "I'll find him there. Where should he go but to Saskatoon—or maybe, dis place. He's not been here—eh?"

McMahon shook his head. He had half expected—even hoped that Gorringe would drop in, for the man had a fascination for him. Gorringe could talk when he felt like talking—which wasn't often. It

amazed and annoyed the Scot to hear this herculean Swede cursing and threatening a man of Gorrings's style.

"What are ye so raw aboot, Christiansen?" he queried.

"He's a dog—he—but never mind what he did—that's between heem and me—yes—just between heem and me. Hans Christiansen never forgets—no, by God!"

He stood up, lurched towards his coat, and was about to pick it up, when the "woof" of dogs came from outside. He pricked up his ears, as he realised that the barking was not from his own dogs.

"Esquimaux dog!" he muttered.

"Aye—it'll be old Black Ball wanting tea," mused McMahon.

A terrific uproar arose without, as the oncoming dog-team met Christiansen's animals. The pistol-like crack of a whip was mingled with the ejaculations of Batouche and Jules, as they strove to prevent a fight. Then came a low strange voice—a voice that caused McMahon to drop his pipe, and Christiansen to stare fixedly at the door. A few seconds later it swung open, and a broad, tall figure in a blanket coat, esquimaux mukluks and fur cap entered. Christiansen uttered a sound that was like a bark.

The newcomer stood still for a moment—his face wreathed in a smile, surveying the two occupants as though with amusement, but one felt instinctively that the amused expression went no further than his features, and that he sensed impending tragedy equally with McMahon. He sauntered towards the

counter, and, releasing his hands from the encumbering mittens, extended the right one to McMahon.

"Well, Mac—I dropped in to wish you the compliments of the season."

"Gorringe!" The Scot's cry carried a distinct warning. Christiansen was recovering from his enormous surprise. His face was livid, and his eyes were bulging from his head.

"I've nothing to trade, Mac," said Gorringe, coolly. "I've been freight carrying. Why, what's wrong with you?"

McMahon's eyes were fixed on Christiansen, who had jerked the revolver from his pocket. He slipped his hand under the counter, where he kept his own weapon, but remembered it was unloaded.

"Look out!" he yelled.

Gorringe never moved. A glance at the mirror behind McMahon showed him as much of Christiansen as he wished to see. The voice of the Swede suddenly boomed out.

"Hands up—swine!"

"Tell your friend to go, Mac. I don't like his behaviour," said Gorringe.

"Christiansen, you fool, put that away," hissed McMahon. "I don't want——"

There was a click as the revolver was cocked, and its murderous owner brought his arm to the horizontal. Gorringe saw it all in the mirror—the great blonde face, with its drooping moustache, the long arm, the devilish hate in the light eyes. To turn round was to deliver himself into the hands of his enemy. To move a hand would bring a bullet from the steady weapon.

McMahon knew this too, and wondered what the outcome would be. He gulped as he looked into Gorringe's immobile face. Christiansen's fingers tightened on the trigger—just a little more pressure——

But it was not given. Gorringe suddenly kicked out with his right foot. It caught the unsuspecting Swede full in the knee. He crumpled up like a broken reed, and measured his length on the floor. Gorringe darted forward, put his foot on the Swede's right wrist, and wrenched the weapon from his fingers. He flung it across to McMahon.

Christiansen dragged himself to his feet, limped towards the door, and bolted it. He turned round and faced Gorringe.

"I'm going to keel you," he muttered.

Gorringe sighed wearily, and sat down on a barrel.

"Did you hear me—I am going to keel you?"

Gorringe looked at the perturbed McMahon, and smiled a little wanly. It was the smile of a man who was tired, very tired, of life, and not particularly anxious to remain on *terra firma*. But to be removed by a creature of Christiansen's type was not quite to his liking. He lighted a cigarette, and shrugged his shoulders as the Swede approached him.

"What you done with her—Summer Moon?" hissed Christiansen. "You speak—and then I keel you."

Gorringe never moved an eyelash, but blew a cloud of smoke towards the ceiling.

"You tell me—now. Quick!" raved the Swede. "Or I choke you with these hands."

He extended two huge muscular fists, to emphasise the threat. Still Gorringe sat in silence, but a frown gathered on his brows, as he visualised an episode in which he had played a certain part.

"You hear me——"

"Go away," snapped Gorringe.

"Yah—swine!"

Christiansen's hands descended. They caught the sitting man by the shoulders, and jerked him to his feet. He stood facing his huge adversary, his eyes burning with a light that boded ill for the Swede.

"Take your hands off," he said steadily.

Christiansen snarled, and then smiled mockingly. No man had ever escaped from those gnarled hands of his. He was proud of his strength—gloried in it. He wanted to see Gorringe howl with pain, and beg for mercy. The iron fingers closed tighter, pressing into the muscular shoulders of the victim. But no cry was uttered. He stood like a statue, his square tanned face impassive, save the eyes which literally blazed. Suddenly the frame seemed to grow taut, there was a lightning movement, and Christiansen's right hand lost its grip. Gorringe's left arm went out like a battering ram, and his fist caught the Swede under the ear. He staggered back, infuriated with the pain but dazed by the totally unexpected counter-attack. Then he laughed insanely, and poised himself on his toes, prior to a savage onslaught. Gorringe stood his ground and waited.

Christiansen descended on him like a huge bear, arms outstretched and fingers hooked. Thud! He staggered back, gasping, as Gorringe's fist found his ribs. The blood from his injured ear was streaming

down his face, giving him an awe-inspiring appearance. If there had been any mercy in his soul before, there was none now. He was out to kill—in any fashion. McMahon knew it and Gorringe, calmly waiting, knew it too.

The huge figure sprang again, head and body shielded by his arms. He closed and caught Gorringe round the waist, lifting him in the air, and laughing madly. McMahon groaned as he saw the body raised high, and Christiansen hesitating and flushing with conceit, ere he smashed his victim against the wall. The hesitation cost him dear. Gorringe's right hand found the Swede's chin. He gripped it, palm downmost, and pushed with all his might. Christiansen's head went back, his eyes rolling horribly. From the closed mouth a horrible noise was emitted. He tottered, and his grip on Gorringe slackened, and then fell away altogether as he was pushed backwards, to fall with a crash against the counter.

He rose quickly, shook his head like an enraged bull, and rushed forward, blindly, foolishly. McMahon saw a slight change in the calm face of Gorringe. He saw the left arm go back, and then straighten out with terrific force. There was a horrible crack—the sight of a huge body half-bent and swaying, and then a thud as it crumpled up and lay still. Gorringe licked his bleeding knuckles and pursed his lips.

“A knock-out,” he said.

“Mon—that was a terrible blow !”

Gorringe said nothing, but sat down on the barrel, and gazed into nothingness. A minute later McMahon came round the counter. Something about the still

body, gave him cause for apprehension. He stooped down and raised the eyelids, then dived his hand under the coat. With a little hiss of amazement he stood up and faced Gorringe.

"He's—he's dead!" he said.

Gorringe's eyelids came down. He gazed at the still figure, and then stepped to it, and felt the pulse.

"You're right," he said. "He couldn't have been fit. Now what's to be done?"

"Done?—Plant it somewhere, mon. It was no' your fault. He brought it on himself."

There was a noise from outside—Batouche calling for Christiansen. McMahon turned swiftly to Gorringe.

"Quick, get him behind the counter. Better not let those Frenchmen know. They don't love him, but——"

Gorringe nodded, and the pair carried the dead man round the counter, McMahon covering the body with two big bearskins. He then went to the door, and unbolted it. A few minutes later Batouche came in.

"Christiansen won't be going with you," said McMahon. "Maybe he'll follow you on foot to Saskatoon. He's staying here to-night. Better get along now."

Batouche was not greatly astonished to hear this, for the Swede had always shown a desire to remain in the vicinity of any intoxicants.

"What about de leetle boy?" he queried.

McMahon opened his eyes wide.

"Little boy—you don't mean he's got a son with him?"

"Yes. He come wit' us las' trip. Hee's modder die. Hee's asleep now. I leeve heem—yes ? "

McMahon gave Gorringe a quick glance, and saw to what extent this new factor in the situation was affecting him. The latter's head was thrust forward curiously, and his mouth twitched as though he was suffering acute mental agony. He caught McMahon's eye, and made a slight movement which McMahon interpreted correctly.

"Bring him in," he said.

Batouche went out, and a little later brought in a boy of about three years of age wrapped in a blanket. He was still sleeping soundly.

"I'll tak' him," said McMahon.

"But Hans—where is Hans ? "

"Asleep. You hit the trail. He'll follow no doubt."

Batouche shot Gorringe a furtive glance. He recognised him as the man whom the Swede had sought, and wondered that he could sit there like a stone with Christiansen still on the premises. Both he and Jules had heard a noise—very much like a fight, but there had been no shots fired, and he firmly believed that nothing less than a bullet or several bullets could hurt Christiansen. Anyhow it was no affair of his.

"I go," he said. "*Bon soir !* "

McMahon laid the child on some skins, stroked his beard, and looked at Gorringe. Gorringe's fists were clenched, and he was staring before him, biting his lips.

"Don't tak' it to heart, mon. It was no' your fault."

"And to-morrow's the new year," muttered Gorringe.

"Aye—and we'll drink to it."

The Scot fetched his precious bottle of whisky, opened it, and poured out two drinks. He drank his own after a seasonal greeting, but Gorringe did not drink. He still stared before him, as a man does who sees in his own consciousness things regrettable and futures hopeless. At last he stood up and shrugged his shoulders.

"Help me out with—*it*," he said.

McMahon nodded and uncovered the big body. Together they got it on the sleigh. Gorringe covered it with a rug.

"Now I'll take the child."

"Mon, what for ?"

"He's my responsibility. Don't argue—for God's sake get him," he said irritably.

McMahon spread out his hands and obeyed. Argument he knew would be useless; moreover, he didn't want to be cumbered with Christiansen's child. He placed the sleeping infant in Gorringe's arms, and watched the latter making it comfortable at the rear of the sleigh. Five minutes later the whip cracked, and Gorringe, the strange and mysterious, was driving through the falling snow with his new freight.

It was dawn when he arrived at a clearing in the pine woods, north of the "Forks"; and one of his "passengers" only remained—the sleeping child. Christiansen rested along the banks of the river in a shallow grave, carved out of the frozen earth. For two brief hours dogs and man had slept—to awaken

and resume their chilly nocturnal journey in the teeth of blinding snow.

The jingle of the sleigh bells brought a young Cree Indian bounding from a wigwam on the edge of the clearing, plunging up to his knees in the snow. His immobile face relaxed as he recognised the white man, and he saluted gravely, waiting in Indian fashion for the white man to speak.

"Is the sister of 'The Fox that Flies' here?" queried Gorringe.

"She sleeps. Does my white brother wish to speak to Summer Moon?"

"Even so."

The Indian ran into the wigwam and reappeared at once with a slim girl, whose black lustrous eyes showed no sign of sleep. She stood before Gorringe in an attitude of great respect—even veneration.

"I ask a boon of the sister of 'The Fox that Flies,' " said Gorringe quietly.

"Can the Indian maiden refuse whatever the white god asks? Is not her life his for ever? I have spoken."

"Good. I bring a white child." He pointed to the bundle on the sleigh. "Here is money that belongs to him. I go on a long journey, but ere the snows depart I will come again, and see the sister of 'The Fox that Flies'—here. Are my words clear?"

She bowed her head and, on his assent, picked up the infant. For a second her immobility vanished. She gave a little croon of delight as she perceived the flaxen curls and the dimpled cheeks. The pile of

notes—Christiansen's—which Gorringe had placed in her hand she gave to her brother, who grunted and looked straight into Gorringe's eyes, to intimate that he himself would account for them.

"Good!" said Gorringe. "Thus will the debt of Summer Moon be paid."

He raised his hand Indian fashion, mounted the sleigh, and sent his ferocious team helter-skelter across the snow.

* * * * *

The lonely dweller in the wilderness sat before a camp fire a few hours later. The snow had ceased to fall, and the sky had cleared, sending the thermometer down to thirty below zero. Near him was a newly-made cross, roughly fashioned with an axe from a pine log, bearing the inscription, "Here lies Jackson Gorringe." The words fascinated him—amused him until he fully realised the grim jest. Jackson Gorringe was dead—buried there by the side of the great silent river. Who then remained? Who was this frost-bitten man, beside the crackling fire? He frowned as he realised that this nameless one carried the old Jackson Gorringe's memories, and they were not happy memories, and could not be buried quite so easily as the legend would seem to imply.

They came flooding in now—hateful memories, hanging upon a single incident—a girl with radiant hair in a red evening frock—a well-furnished room—himself, five years younger, full of the joy of life and in love—a cold kiss that froze his heart—an evening paper on the table telling of the smash of the house of

Gorringe—and then disillusionment. The hideous realisation that he had wasted his youth on—this. Then the sea—Canada—hardship—temporary debauchery and the end of all hope.

And now he was dead—this Jackson Gorringe who had been a curse to himself and to everyone else. The New Year! What did it offer—what could it bring but what every New Year had brought five times in succession? In New York, in Paris, in London, men and women were making new resolutions. Well, he had made his. But to keep it was the difficulty. It was simple enough expressed in words—*to be of some use!*

Ten days later he stood before an officer of the North West Mounted Police at the recruiting office in Winnipeg.

“H’m—you seem to possess all the necessary qualifications.” The officer gazed at the red-haired muscular figure admiringly. “I guess the doctor will pass you. What name did you say?”

“O’Neill, sir—Shane O’Neill!”

CHAPTER I

THE N. W. M. P.

IN the wild and roaring "nineties," Regina was the capital of the North West Territory. It sprawled across the railway track—an unimposing conglomeration of wooden shanties on a dead flat prairie, that stretched in all directions as far as the eye could reach—a veritable ocean of nothingness, overwhelming in its unbroken monotony. Nevertheless, to the tired wanderer returning from the vast and unpeopled wilderness, that ran all the way from the great lakes to the Rocky Mountains in one direction, and to the Pole in the other, Regina represented something more than a collection of band boxes—it stood for Life itself, a link with the outer world, where most of the amenities of civilisation that a railway connection offers could be enjoyed—at a price.

But Regina was important for another reason—it was the headquarters of the Mounted Police, those guardians of law and order, who were fast making Canada a country safe to live in. The barracks lay on the prairie itself, two and a half miles from the railway. Like the township, it was a wood constructed cantonment, built in the form of a square,

with officers' mess, men's huts, guard-room, and cells separated from each other in case of fire.

On this day in early December, the barracks was the scene of much bustle, and not a little excitement, for the scattered detachments of the police were being called in for the winter, and the huts were rapidly being filled with men, who were glad to remove their spur straps, and draw off their long boots—to sleep once more between sheets and hold converse with other humans.

The life of the average trooper was one endless span of hard duty. In the burning heat of summer, and often in the pitiless cold of winter, their work lay under the open skies.

The traditions of the force were high. The men who comprised it were truly of "all sorts and conditions," but the corps had a way of branding them with its own peculiar mark ere a year of service was done. There were men whose families ranked high in British and Colonial society, men who literally had no names—had mislaid them for convenience sake. Canadians, Americans, English—all were melted down in the crucible and hall-marked with the buffalo button as guardians of the law in the Great Lone Land.

In the far corner of the hut, polishing his buttons was Fortesque, whose father owned ten thousand acres away in Lincolnshire. Talking to him was Bramble—aristocratic, cadaverous, who until a few years back boasted a colonel's rank in a famous regiment. How they came into the N.W.M.P. nobody knew, and nobody ever thought of asking.

Standing at the window, gazing across a track of

deep mud, was Rodd—lanky, ill-fashioned, but as tough as an ex-Arizona cow-puncher can be. Rodd had dropped in at the recruiting office two years back as casually as he might have dropped into any drinking saloon, and notified his desire to join the police.

"Can you ride?" he was asked.

"I guess."

"Can you shoot?"

"Sure."

To illustrate the latter assertion, he whipped out a six-shooter, and shattered three gas globes at the end of the room before they could point out that that was an irregular proceeding. That he could ride was abundantly proven later, when a jocular rough-riding corporal led out a wild young broncho, with eyes blindfolded, for Trooper Hiram Rodd to experiment upon. The broncho had three broken collar bones, two ribs and sundry minor things to his credit, and when the lean-faced Rodd asked for the bandage to be removed from its eyes, it evidently believed it was going to add to the list.

Rodd held a different opinion. The broncho snorted, reared, bent itself double, stood up almost perpendicularly, rolled over and generally indulged in every trick that a thoroughly unbroken broncho knows by instinct. But Rodd was like a leech. When the horse eventually was reduced to rolling over, Rodd was off and on again before the beast was properly on its feet. The troopers yelled themselves hoarse, and the rough-riding corporal looked sick.

"Gosh—I'd like to show yuh a *real* wild horse," said Rodd.

They tried no further tricks on Rodd after that. He proved himself to be an admirable policeman, and a stout comrade. Rodd it was who brought in the notorious "Three-fingered Steele," who had been making the lives of settlers in Montana a veritable hell—shooting men in cold blood, and taking their ploughing teams over the border to sell them in Canada. Rodd it was who had all but succeeded in "getting" the elusive "Captain Flood," who for five years had played havoc with banks, stores, and railway trains all the way from Regina to Calgary, Flood still carried a carbine bullet in his intestines, and Rodd fondly hoped that the time would come when he could meet the wily Flood within range of a six-shooter, the bullet of which had a much more devastating effect when planted in the right place.

He lighted a cigarette and moved from the window towards Bramble, who was perusing the latest magazine from England.

"O'Neill ain't back," he said.

Bramble yawned.

"Oh, he'll come. He's out after that infernal Flood."

Rodd whistled.

"Gee! If that don't get my goat. O'Neill ain't got no right to Flood—he's mine."

"Perhaps O'Neill won't get him. Every man in the corps has tried his hand on Flood for five years, and Flood is still—flooding."

Rodd shook his head. O'Neill was his bosom companion. He knew O'Neill better than any man in the corps.

"If O'Neill is after Flood he'll get him," he said. "Did O'Neill ever fail to get his man?"

"No. But Flood——"

"Oh, Flood's jest an or'nary skunk with a bunch of 'breeds' ready to wire him news, whenever a red-coat gets within a mile. What chance has Flood got with O'Neill? That feller sure gets my money every time, sir. But maybe he ain't after Flood."

"He is—I met him at Moosejaw—he'd just got instructions through. Flood was seen on Buffalo Lake."

"Then it's a sure thing. O'Neill will get him. Now if it was any other guy, I'd break his neck."

"Why make an exception in the case of O'Neill?" drawled Bramble. "I'd love to see you attempting to assassinate O'Neill."

Rodd grinned. He held O'Neill in highest esteem, for O'Neill was utterly different to any other man in the corps. They knew less of O'Neill than they did of anyone. Of all mysterious men, he was the most mysterious. No man who had ever gone on active service with O'Neill, ever succeeded in piercing his sphinx-like calm. This was all the more strange in such a country as Canada, where men, often flung together for long periods, were prone to confess their longings—their hearts' desires. Rodd, who on occasion talked enough for six men, had never quite understood O'Neill. When he talked on any contentious subject, with a view to generating an argument which he loved, O'Neill merely grunted and tacitly agreed. When the wily ex-cow puncher deliberately changed his views and argued from the other side O'Neill uttered the same grunt. It was exasperat-

ing. Why couldn't a man hold some kind of opinion ? Once Rodd had broached the subject of women and added :

" Ever been in love, O'Neill ? "

O'Neill swung his horse round, stared at Rodd as though the latter had given voice to an amazing remark, and then laughed insanely, and went flying up the trail. It was enough to convince Rodd that that subject was taboo.

Two years of acquaintanceship had the result of increasing his admiration for O'Neill, until it became a kind of hero-worship. O'Neill became a demi-god, an inscrutable but dominating personality, who made his influence felt, not only on Rodd, but on every member.

" B " Troop, to which he belonged, called him " the body snatcher." " A " Troop, quartered at Maple Creek, referred to him as " that fellow at Regina." " C " Troop, away in the country of Bloods and Peigans at Fort Macleod, dubbed him " Devil O'Neill." It was notorious that O'Neill always got his man—how he got him nobody knew, for O'Neill never went into details. A rumour had gone round, that on two occasions O'Neill had refused promotion, but whether it was true or not it was obvious that the relationship between him and the Commissioner was a little different to that usually existing between a plain trooper and his colonel.

All through the evening men were coming in. Yarns went round, and " lies were swopped " in the usual fashion. Rodd, disappointed at O'Neill's non-appearance, slid between the sheets and went to sleep. He was awakened long before dawn by the blare of the

bugle, and the first person his gaze rested on was a broad, red-headed figure coolly shaving not ten yards away.

"O'Neill!" he gasped.

O'Neill turned and nodded casually.

"Hullo, Rodd!"

"When did you bunch in?"

"Just now."

He went on shaving, while Rodd got into his pants. Bramble sitting on his bed, indulging in an early morning cigarette, drawled.

"Did you get him, O'Neill?"

"Get who?"

"Flood."

O'Neill put the razor away, and slipped on his coat.

"He's celled by this time," he replied quietly.

"Hell!" ejaculated Rodd. "And I wanted to get Flood. Wal, maybe I'll get the guy that works with him—Todson."

O'Neill laughed softly, as he drew on his tunic. Rodd stared at him.

"Why not?" he queried.

"He's with Flood. I brought him along too."

Rodd flourished his razor, threw it in the air, and deftly caught it by the handle to Bramble's intense horror. Fortesque walked across to O'Neill.

"How did you get Flood and Todson?" he asked.

"I persuaded them it was the lesser of two evils. They preferred a few years at Stony Mountain to a revolver bullet," he replied.

Fortesque, who was corporal in charge of the room, pursed his lips. The capture of the notorious "Captain Flood" was a momentous event, and any

man but O'Neill would have gloried in his good luck. But O'Neill was different. He made it quite clear that the business was over and done with.

The dawn came with a howling blizzard. Through the windows of the hut one could see nothing but a whirling mass of snow through which occasionally plunged a human form, blurred and ghost-like in appearance, or a struggling horse being driven to stables.

"Some weather!" growled Rodd. "And I'm detailed to bring in those remounts from Calgary. Why in hell do they send us bronchos this time of the year. Wal, I hope the darn train has run into a snow drift.

Rodd disappeared after breakfast, and O'Neill spent an hour with his kit, stowing away the thin summer outfit, and checking the articles that were required for the long and discomfiting winter. No other corps in the world was better equipped than the Police Trooper of the North West—1 cloak cape and belt; 1 forage cap; 1 fur cap; 1 white helmet; 2 pairs long riding boots; 1 pair ankle boots; 3 pairs riding breeches; 1 greatcoat; 1 tunic (serge); 1 tunic (cloth); 1 pair gauntlets; 1 pair buckskin mitts; 2 pairs moccasins (moose); 2 pairs flannel drawers; 2 over shirts; 2 under shirts; 2 pairs long stockings; 4 pairs socks; 1 haversack; 1 rug; 1 hold-all with razor, comb, shaving brush and sponge; 2 pairs sheets; 3 pairs blankets; 1 waterproof sheet; 1 palliasse and pillow case; 1 pair overalls, 1 jacket; 1 pair steel spurs; Horse brush and curry-comb; 1 burnisher; 1 brush, blacking; 1 brush, polishing; 1 brush, brass; 1 brush, cloth; 1 button stick; 1 pair blanket straps;

1 pair braces ; 1 kit-bag ; 1 cup, plate, knife, fork and spoon ; 1 rug ; 1 tuque (red woollen nightcap).

Arms consisted of the Winchester repeating carbine, holding nine rounds in the magazine, and the Enfield revolver. Rations were as abundant as the kit. For each day a trooper drew $1\frac{1}{2}$ lbs. Beef (or 1 lb. bacon), $1\frac{1}{2}$ lbs. bread or $1\frac{1}{4}$ lbs. flour, $\frac{1}{2}$ oz. tea, $\frac{1}{2}$ oz. coffee, 3 ozs. sugar, 1 oz. rice, with potatoes or beans in plenty, not to mention such extras as salt and pepper. These were merely barrack rations. When out on the prairie the amounts were increased by fifty per cent.

Nor did they prove to be excessive, for life on the plains was hard, and in winter bodily heat evaporated at an alarming rate and had to be replaced in the only natural way.

O'Neill had just stowed away his forage cap under the white helmet, and taken the thick fur cap in its place when a sergeant entered.

"Colonel wants Trooper O'Neill at once."

O'Neill nodded, put on his greatcoat, and went out

CHAPTER II

MARCIA

COLONEL ASHTON, the Commissioner of Police, sat in his office before a pile of documents.

He was a grizzled man of fifty-five, with iron-grey hair and wrinkled forehead. Twenty-five summers and winters in the North West had left their mark on him, for two fingers of his right hand were missing, and one ear was withered. Both of these calamities had taken place in a military expedition against the Blackfeet over twenty years ago, when a more than usually severe winter had found the small and ill-equipped force of "regulars" high up in the Blackfeet country.

Usually a very reserved and phlegmatic man, he was, this morning, in exceeding good humour. He pushed the pile of documents away from him, and rested his chin on his hands as he gazed reflectively through the window. The cause of the satisfied smile on his lips lay in a cell not many yards away—"Captain Flood." Flood had been a veritable nightmare to Ashton—a reflection upon the vigilance of the N.W.M.P. Now Flood was in custody, and would soon wear a ball and chain in Rocky Mountain penitentiary. What a triumph for the corps—Flood, the terror of

the North West, brought to justice! He sighed as a knock came on the door, and a sergeant entered and saluted.

"Trooper O'Neill, sir!"

He nodded and O'Neill entered, clicked his heels, and saluted. The sergeant at a word from the colonel withdrew.

"I wanted to thank you, O'Neill."

O'Neill never moved an inch, but a suspicion of a smile flickered about the corners of his tight mouth.

"The corps owes you a debt of gratitude," resumed the colonel. "Flood has always been our bugbear, and for five years he has continually evaded capture. I should like to express our gratitude in some material form."

He was obviously waiting for a response, so O'Neill murmured, "There's no need, sir."

"But there is. O'Neill, I should like to offer you a commission."

"Thank you, sir—but I'd rather not."

Ashton looked at the straight figure.

"Frankly, O'Neill, why do you refuse promotion. It isn't usual?"

"I signed on for five years, sir. That leaves but a bare two months."

Ashton raised his eyebrows at the significance of this quiet remark.

"But you'll sign on again?"

"No, sir."

The colonel stood up, and paced the room. This was quite unexpected. O'Neill, the darling of the corps, leaving it. That possibility had never occurred to him. He swung round on the trooper.

"Is that definite?"

"Quite."

"But why, why? Man—think it over. There's opportunity for a man like you. You were born for this sort of calling. There's no man in the whole corps more feared, more respected, more successful. Look here—Stimson of 'E' troop is retiring. I'll give you the troop."

"It's good of you, sir—but my mind is made up."

The door opened, and the fur-clad figure of a woman entered. She was Marcia Ashton, the Commissioner's daughter, a rather spoilt girl of twenty-three, proud, a trifle coquettish and eminently attractive physically. She hesitated as she beheld O'Neill.

"I beg your pardon, father," she murmured. "I didn't know you——"

"It's all right, Marcia. Come in and help me convert this recalcitrant policeman towards a sense of his own importance."

Marcia came forward, smiled at O'Neill, and sat down, simulating a bored expression.

"I've just offered O'Neill a commission, Marcia," said the colonel.

"And he has refused it."

The Colonel raised his eyebrows.

"How did you guess?"

She shrugged her shoulders as though the deduction was the simplest thing in the world. Then she turned her very expressive eyes to the trooper.

"It isn't everyone who can afford to refuse a commission in the police, Mr. O'Neill."

"I appreciate the colonel's offer, Miss Ashton,

but it isn't everyone who is placed as I am placed. I have certain—obligations."

It was obvious that Marcia was wondering what those obligations were. O'Neill was an enigma to her, as he was to everyone. His speech, his bearing, his whole temperament was such as to keep her inquisitive mind constantly at work. It was not usual for Marcia to take an interest in mere "Troopers" with a score or so of young officers on hand to flirt with, and she would have hated to confess that O'Neill exercised a tremendous fascination for her.

"So you prefer to remain a trooper?" she asked.

"Yes—at present."

"At present——!"

"O'Neill is leaving the corps, Marcia," put in Ashton. "His time expires in seven weeks or so."

Marcia glanced at the rigid figure. He merely moved his head to indicate it was so.

"I'm sorry," she said. "We can't afford to lose you, O'Neill."

"There are always as good fish in the sea."

The colonel frowned. He didn't think so. Excellent men there were in hundreds, but the O'Neills were few and far between. O'Neill had never failed to get his man. The very name of O'Neill was sufficient to set any desperado thinking. He stood for the far-reaching hand of the law, as no other man had ever done. Indomitable, fearless, pugnacious to a degree, this red-haired policeman's name was better known in the North West than that of the Governor himself.

"Well, well—it can't be helped," sighed the colonel.

"But I should like to extend some token of my

gratitude. Is there nothing I can do for you, O'Neill ? ”

“ I should like a few days' leave, sir.”

“ Certainly. Write out a permit and I'll sign it. A trip to Winnipeg ? ”

“ No, sir—up country.”

The colonel stared, and then nodded to intimate that the interview was over. O'Neill saluted, turned on his heels, and marched out.

“ There goes the best man the corps has ever possessed,” said Ashton.

“ And the least understandable,” sighed Marcia. “ I wonder what his obligations are ? ”

“ They are certainly his own business,” retorted Ashton a trifle sharply.

“ Father ! ”

“ My dear—you shouldn't try to probe people's pasts. O'Neill came to us out of the unknown. We asked him no questions, because he was obviously a gentleman. Now he's going back whence he came. Well, there's many a cattle runner who will thank God when he gets to know. But did you want me ? ”

“ Yes. I wanted to know if I can go to Buffalo Lake to-morrow. The Andersons are expecting me. I sha'n't stay more than two days.”

“ It'll be hard going—there's a foot of new snow on the trail. Better let Tony escort you.”

“ Oh, can you spare him ? ”

“ I shall have to,” he said with a smile, knowing that Tony would jump at the opportunity. It was Ashton's hope that Marcia and Captain Anthony Wren might one day find it convenient to “ settle down.” He had no doubt about Wren, but Marcia

was a different matter. Ashton had never quite succeeded in fathoming Marcia's heart. He was not blind to the fact that she flirted outrageously with every unmarried officer in the corps, showing a preference for "Tony," but he hoped that was merely a phase of her youth that would pass ere long, and leave her with a better perspective.

After dinner that evening, Wren dropped in on Marcia, and found her making noises on the piano. She stopped as soon as she saw him, and extended her hand, which he kissed in gallant fashion.

"I've just left the colonel, Marcia—in the Mess. So we are to be trail companions?"

"Yes—I'm going up to Buffalo Lake to stay with the Andersons for a day or two."

"What time shall you start?"

"Immediately after breakfast. It's a beastly nuisance."

Wren opened his eyes. To him the journey was most welcome.

"Don't you want to go?" he queried.

"Not much. Glory Anderson bores me, and old Anderson is such a queer person. It'll be deadily dull. You'll come and escort me back, Tony, on Monday?"

"I'd escort you to the end of the earth, Marcia, if you'd only let me," he replied devoutly.

Marcia laughed, and laid her slim hand on his shoulder.

"How you love to make pretty speeches, Tony. They come so easily to your lips, it makes me wonder whether it is the result of much practice."

"Marcia!" he remonstrated. "You know you

don't think that. There's no other woman to whom I have ever offered—compliments."

"That's rather strange for a police officer, isn't it?"

"I don't see why."

"The uniform, Tony. Women grovel before uniform. There's a fatal fascination about it."

Wren gazed intently at the beautiful figure beside him, and sighed plaintively.

"I wish I could think so," he murmured. "——in the present case."

"I am the exception, Tony. I have grown so used to the sight of crimson and gold, that the spell is shattered."

Wren sat for a few moments in silence. He wondered whether this was the opportunity so long sought after. It was seldom he got a chance to speak to Marcia alone. Usually their meetings took place in public, among a crowd of officers and their wives. Had he been certain of Marcia, he would have found an opportunity of speaking before, but something about her repelled him. He had noticed several times her clever evasions, when conversation wandered into certain intimate channels. He felt the influx of a new courage now, and determined to risk everything.

"Marcia, you've known me a long time now—seven years?"

"Yes, since I had my hair down. But why——"

"You've looked upon me as a kind of 'pal,' haven't you?"

"Of course I have. I look upon all the officers in the corps as 'pals.' How could it be otherwise—I see them almost every day, year in and year out."

Wren bit his lips, and some of his optimism oozed away.

"Is that all I have been, Marcia ? "

"Tony ! Isn't that sufficient ? "

"It'll have to be, if you wish it so." He hesitated and then grasped her two hands, and looked fearlessly into her eyes.

"But you must know my—my feelings are not limited to that. Marcia, you must have known that for two years now, I have loved you with all the strength of my soul. Oh, please listen, truth must out. I want you, Marcia, as I never wanted anything before. Isn't there just the faintest hope for me ? A thousand times I have been on the point of asking you, but somehow I was afraid—lest I should shatter the dream for ever. I would rather keep the dream—live in a fool's paradise, but to-night—I can't keep silent whatever the outcome. Can you—can you love me ? "

Marcia toyed with the tassel on her dress, with head averted. Her first desire was to laugh and tease him, but the depth of his voice, and the sincerity of his appeal, prompted her to caution.

"Tony, I wish you hadn't asked me that."

Wren's face fell.

"Then it means——"

"No, no. But I want to think things out in my own way. I wish I could love you, Tony—I should be happy if I could. But what is the use of deluding oneself. Sometimes I think I wasn't made for love—and yet——"

Wren waited for her to continue, but she showed no

desire to complete the sentence. It set his mind wandering.

"Is—is there anyone else, Marcia?"

"No—I—I don't think so," she stammered.

Wren shook his head, and dropped the subject promptly. What could the hiatus mean, but that there was someone else. It staggered him. Who could it be? None of his brother officers had appeared to fare any better than himself at wooing the adorable Marcia, and yet her speech, her slight blush, made the fact evident, and there was someone, a man who had succeeded where he and a dozen others had failed.

"I'll have to get back to my quarters," he said. "I have a letter to post that must catch the mail. I'll bring the horses round at ten o'clock in the morning."

She led him to the door, and held out her hand as he was about to depart.

"I'm sorry, Tony—but there's always hope you know."

"I am not easily beaten," he replied. "I shall fight on—despite my rival. Good-night!"

Marcia gasped, and walked back to the sitting-room. His rival! She smiled wanly as she thought of it. If Wren only knew that the unknown personage who had stirred, and was stirring, Marcia's heart was a red-headed trooper of the name of O'Neill!

CHAPTER III

MARCIA GETS A SHOCK

THE thermometer registered ten degrees below zero when Marcia and Wren started out for Buffalo Lake. Though this was but a moderate temperature for December, and not unpleasantly cold in itself, the presence of wind made it almost unbearable. Marcia was wrapped in her thickest bearskin coat, with but a few inches of her face exposed to the biting blast. Boots being forbidden by the great cold, both Wren and Marcia wore Indian moccasins over two pairs of thick stockings. Wren had also changed the steel bits of the horses for celluloid ones, a very necessary operation where the temperature is such as to lend cold steel the properties of hot iron.

Buffalo Lake lay thirty odd miles north west of Regina—a narrow sheet of water on the Qu'Appelle River, approached either by the winding Wascana Cr  ek or the overland trail. Anderson's trading post lay on the further side of the lake.

Wren decided on the overland route. The fresh horses cantered through the soft snow, with the merciless wind in their teeth. The prairie, dazzling under the sun, lay flat on either hand, the frost glittering

like diamonds on its unbroken surface. North, south, east and west was the clear cut horizon limning the cerulean sky. Save for the soft thud of the hoofs and the slight "swish" of the wind, no sound broke the awful silence. After ten miles of progress, the tinted snow goggles had to be used. Now and again the leader horse would plunge into a snow drift, breast deep, and send the fine particles flying as he clambered out. Once Marcia was forced to dismount, and rub her nose vigorously with snow, to save losing it altogether.

"It's this infernal wind," growled Wren. "It's worse than sixty below. It oughtn't to be blowing at all. Are your hands all right?"

Marcia nodded. She had two pairs of fingerless mitts under the buckskin gloves. They plunged again through a clump of pines, decked in all their winter glory. The vibration of the horses feet was sufficient to send little streams of minute snow dancing in the air from the encumbered branches. For an hour very little conversation passed between them. It was too cold for speech. Gradually the terrible "pushing" wind abated. It came in little fierce gusts and then died away altogether.

"Thank heavens!—the wind is gone," ejaculated Marcia.

"But the temperature is going down to balance things," replied Wren. "Anyhow it's better than the wind—we ought to be near the river."

From out of the dazzling plain arose the tops of a line of trees.

"There it is," said Marcia. "How far?"

"Two miles. Hullo! There's someone coming

up behind in a 'jumper.' By jove, the fellow is moving ! ”

Marcia turned in the saddle, and saw the oncoming horse and its rider. The animal sent up showers of loose snow and was rapidly overtaking them.

“It's a trooper,” she said. “O'Neill—it must be O'Neill. There's no patrol in this direction—and he said he was going North. Oh, don't let him beat us.”

“Why not ? ”

“I don't want him to. Hurry up ! ”

She sent her horse forward, and Wren followed. The frozen river hove into sight, distinguishable only by the scattered spruce trees along its bank. The driver of the “jumper” behind was making tremendous progress. He waved the whip in his hand, but neither Wren nor Marcia perceived the action, or they might have realised it was a warning to them. Marcia's horse took the river ice, slithering a little as his hoofs struck through the snow, and found the treacherous surface. The animal regained its balance and leapt forward under her urging heels. Wren came thundering up behind.

“I'll race you to the bank,” cried Marcia.

There was a terrible crack, and she turned round swiftly to Wren.

“Don't come—don't—— ! ”

Wren was almost on top of her. He turned his horse to lessen the weight, but had scarcely gone two yards when a violent crack, like a pistol shot, echoed over the snow. The white surface beneath the horses' feet suddenly collapsed, and black water gushed up. Two seconds later horses and riders were struggling frantically amid the jagged ice——

O'Neill, the man behind, set his mouth as he witnessed the catastrophe. He plied the whip unmercifully, and the horse, tired as it was, responded . . . A few minutes later he was at the edge of the river. He jumped down, slashed the reins asunder with his knife, and ran with them to the hideous black hole in the ice. Marcia was clinging to the broken edge of a huge floe, and the two horses were swimming round and round, their eyes filled with terror. But Wren had disappeared.

"Hold on!" cried O'Neill.

He ran round the edge of the ice, and attempted to step on the floe, but it would not support his weight, and almost caused the clinging girl to lose her hold. He took the severed reins, and threw one end to her. She grabbed it with one half-frozen hand.

"Can you hold on?"

"I—I think so."

He saw the mittened hand close rigidly, and pulled hard on the reins. Marcia's drenched body came out of the water. A tremendous heave brought it sliding across the loose sheet of ice. She was within two feet of him . . . She saw him fling himself on his chest and reach out with his long arms . . . She felt them grip her by the shoulders, like a vice, and almost choked with joy as she realised that the icy death which she had believed inevitable was now behind her . . . She lay on the soft snow with O'Neill massaging her face.

"Get up," he hissed. "Keep your circulation going. Wren is somewhere in that hole—caught by the weeds."

He left her, and scanned the black water, beyond the loose ice. A few bubbles near one of the struggling horses caught his eye. Wren was down there, somewhere—perhaps being pounded to death by the horses' hoofs! He flung off his buffalo coat, and slithered across the loose sheet of ice, to plunge headfirst into the water. Marcia, who had regained her feet, could do no more than stare, horrified, at the swirl of the water as his body disappeared. A little cry left her blue lips, and she turned her head away from the awful scene—the inky depths—the hopeless, struggling, dumb horses, fighting to the last—

Then she heard a gasp, and turned to find O'Neill on the surface supporting an inert body. He swam to the loose ice.

"The reins!" he gasped. "The loop end!"

She flung it towards him, and he placed it under Wren's arms. Marcia pulled with all her strength, and succeeded in getting Wren to the loose ice, but no further.

"He'll freeze," cried O'Neill. "Hold on. I can get across lower down."

She nodded and twisted the reins round her arm. O'Neill swam vigorously to the end of the open space and at length found a landing place. He pulled himself over the edge, and ran towards Marcia. Together they brought the half-frozen Wren to safety.

"Look after him—rub him," growled O'Neill. "I've got to attend to those horses."

He ran to his "jumper" sleigh, and came back with an axe, and a rifle. Marcia closed her eye as she saw the weapon. She knew it was for the horse she had

ridden, who was fast approaching complete exhaustion, and was sinking lower and lower in the water. She turned her head, and a second later, heard a report. When she looked again only one horse was swimming—and O'Neill was hacking away at the ice in front of him—retreating towards the shore as he made a passage. The gleaming blade came down with terrific force again and again without pause. The remaining horse, gifted with uncanny intelligence, swam towards the passage, breasting the jagged loose ice, and fighting with renewed vigour.

"Good lad!" cried O'Neill, encouragingly. "Good old laddie! We'll get you—we'll get you—ah!"

The horse's feet found bottom at last. A few more strokes with the axe, and the animal was clambering on the ice. O'Neill grabbed the reins, and ran the beast up and down. Then he flew to Marcia.

"He's all right. How's the captain?"

Wren opened his eyes, and gazed blankly at his rescuer. O'Neill turned at once, and without a word commenced to cut suitable branches from the spruce trees to make a fire. In the "jumper" were several strange parcels, tied up with paper. He snapped the string from one of them, and carried away the wrapper, exposing a toy engine. A few minutes later a fire was crackling on the bank, and all three were undergoing the painful process of thawing.

It had all been accomplished so quickly, so adeptly, it took Marcia's breath away. Already the black hole was covered with thin ice. Little remained to evidence the fact that but a quarter of an hour ago,

she was in the chilly hands of Death. She looked at the grim figure of O'Neill as he plunged a mess tin filled with water into the fire.

"But for you. I should be where that poor horse is," she murmured.

"I tried to warn you," he replied. "You crossed at a dangerous place. Until the snow came the Indians kept it clear for fish traps. You should have crossed lower down."

Wren, still a little dazed at his miraculous escape, held out his hand.

"Thanks, O'Neill," he said simply.

O'Neill shook his hand and nodded. It was the kind of gratitude he understood best.

"Did you get caught in the weeds?" he queried.

"Yes. I thought I was done for. I held my breath until my lungs seemed fit to burst. Then I let it all out. It relieved me for a few seconds. I was just about to open my mouth, and give up the ghost when you arrived. Are you all right, Marcia?"

Marcia nodded, though her hands and feet were aching painfully.

"How are we going to get to Anderson's with only one horse?" she asked.

"Take mine," said O'Neill. "I can man-handle the 'jumper.' It's very light, and I have only a few miles to go."

"I shouldn't think——"

"Please."

He uttered the monosyllable in a way that brooked no further refusal, and poked the fire beneath the bubbling mess tin. Marcia watched him furtively—

admiring the total absense of embarrassment in the company of his superior officer, and his colonel's daughter. She felt he ought to have exhibited signs of nervousness—spilled the water or sat in solemn subservience in the presence of the "high and mighty." That he did not act according to schedule, filled her with a slight annoyance, which only vanished when she reflected, that but for him her body might now be drifting down under the ice. She shuddered.

"Come nearer the fire, Marcia—you're cold," said Wren.

"No—I was only thinking."

"Then don't. Take some of O'Neill's excellent coffee, and thank God."

"Or Mr. O'Neill," she said.

O'Neill shrugged his shoulders as though he resented the remark. He produced two mugs and, having made the coffee, filled them, and passed them to his two companions.

"What about you?" queried Wren.

"I'll use the mess can when you have finished."

Marcia sipped the warm welcome beverage, and nodded her satisfaction.

"You seem to have come well prepared for so short a journey," she said.

"I'm used to prairie life, Miss Ashton. No true wanderer would leave camp without the full accoutrement."

They finished the coffee, and O'Neill unharnessed the horse from the "jumper" and "fixed up" the severed reins. He stood holding the latter, waiting for Marcia to mount.

"Must I?" she queried.

"If you please."

She thought he was going to help her into the saddle, but he stood aside, and Wren proffered his hand instead. O'Neill walked back to the "jumper" and replaced the axe, revolver and cooking utensils. He fastened a pair of snow-shoes on his feet, and pulled the conveyance towards him.

"Is there anything else I can do, sir?"

"No thanks," replied Wren. "I think you have done enough already."

O'Neill drew himself up, and saluted gravely. Wren returned the salute, and Marcia smiled, and looked at the wooden contraption on runners that O'Neill commenced to drag behind him. Her heart beat quickly, as she perceived among the pots, pans and rugs several brown paper parcels, and exposed to the light of day *a toy engine*.

"Are you ready, Marcia?" asked Wren.

"Y-yes," she murmured, and pulled on the rein. Half an hour later they were moving up the side of Buffalo Lake, and O'Neill was but a speck in the distance.

"Tony, what lies in that direction?" she asked, pointing towards the disappearing figure.

"Nothing within fifty miles, except a wigwam. A Cree Indian lives there—quarrelled with his tribe, I believe."

"Alone?"

"No—with his sister."

His sister! She lapsed into silence. Where could O'Neill be going, but to that wigwam, and

for whom was the toy engine ? She laughed bitterly.

“ Who would have thought it,” she said.

“ Thought what ? ”

“ Oh—nothing ! ”

CHAPTER IV

THE FALL OF THE DICE

AT the moment when O'Neill was entering the wigwam of "The Fox that Flies" to behold his "responsibility" in the shape of a fair lad of eight years, who welcomed him with a wild shout of joy, strange events were taking place two hundred miles to the north.

In a commodious and well built shack in the French colony of St. Claire, a group of people sat round a truckle bed, on which lay a young girl. The central figure, a gaunt, bearded man of fifty, sat in a chair by the head of the bed, one hand placed flat on the table beside him, and the other resting on the pale arm of his dying daughter. This was Armand Lestrangle—a settler in the far north. Opposite him—at the foot of the bed—sat two younger men—his sons. Pierre, the elder, was thick set, coarse of feature and morose. Paul, his brother, was short, wiry and good to look upon. Like Pierre, his face was now clouded and sullen; but this was entirely due to circumstances. The figure on the bed moved a little and moaned. Old Lestrangle's hand wandered along the fair arm and caressed the head.

"There, there!" he muttered. "The good father will soon be here."

Paul stood up, thrust his hand in his pocket, and looked out of the window. The tragedy had fallen so swiftly, it had temporarily paralysed their brains. One thing only they knew—Celeste would die ere the sun set. The doctor had been emphatic on that point. The self-inflicted wound was past healing. It was a question of time—minutes. It was only two hours since Lestrangle had found her, half buried in the snow, with the keen hunting knife still clasped in her hand, and a mortal wound in her side. Since then no word had been spoken by the girl. It was the doctor who solved the mystery, while they were out of the room. It burst upon Lestrangle and the two brothers like a thunderbolt—robbing them of speech, and almost of the power to think. Celeste had been but a delicate child of the Northland, as sweet as any flower of the plains. And now this—this—!

"*Mon Dieu!*" gasped Pierre. "We find heem—the man—yes——"

"Hush!" whispered Lestrangle. "——ah—if she would only speak."

In the next room the other living member of the family—Marie—was preparing a meal. In every way she was the feminine counterpart of Paul—raven black in colouring, petite, impetuous, a merry character normally. She was four years younger than the sullen Pierre, and one year older than Paul.

Her eyes were wet with tears as she spread the cloth on the table, and looked with quivering lips towards the room, wherein her sister lay breathing her

last. To lose Celeste were bad enough, but to lose her under such circumstances filled her soul with horror and pain. A few minutes later Paul came out. She looked at him swiftly.

"Yes," he said. "She speaks—I could not stay. I cannot bear to watch. But she asks for you, Marie."

"Is she——?"

"Slowly." He sat down, and dropped his head in his hands. Marie moved towards the door. She closed it noiselessly behind her, and walked to the bed. Celeste's eyes were open—blue and misty, and wonderful against the deadly pale face.

"Marie!" she whispered. "I dreamed I was dead. But no—I see, I feel. Why, you look so sad. I am happy—verra happy."

Marie kissed the thin cheeks, and smiled bravely. Then she turned her eyes questioningly to her father, who shook his head.

"She will not speak," said Pierre through his teeth.

"You must not ask me," said Celeste to Marie. "It does not matter now—and you seek revenge. I did not mean that you should ever know—I loved him so much."

The awkward, bear-like figure of Pierre came nearer the bed. He took Celeste's hand, and pressed it to his lips.

"Celeste, for the sake of other women—you must tell. Why should he go free. Who is he—his name?"

Celeste moved her head slightly to intimate that her resolution was fixed.

"Is he in St. Claire?"

Again the slight shake of the head. Pierre moved back and shook his fists.

"I find heem—by Gar, I find heem!"

Old Lestrangle, whose determination to find the man was no less deep, silenced him with a gesture. Such things were better done without boasting. Marie was too intent watching the slowly sinking figure to think of aught else. A noise from the next room caused her to look towards the door. Paul appeared in company with the priest who "worked" among the French settlers in the North Saskatchewan, and happened by good fortune to be in St. Claire. He raised his hand in a brief blessing as he entered, and addressed old Lestrangle in his native tongue.

"This is a great misfortune—an accident I understand?"

"Yes, father—an accident," then ashamed of the evasion. "No—a murder—a vile murder."

"Father!" The voice came from the bed, and the priest knelt down before it.

"I wish to speak to the good Father, alone," whispered Celeste. "Quick, there is not much time. Come back—after."

Lestrangle nodded, and he and his family moved out quietly. They sat about in silence, waiting for the crisis.

"She will tell the father everything, under the seal of confession," said Pierre. "And we—we shall never know."

Lestrangle frowned. The situation baffled him completely. He had had no idea there was any

man in the life of the quiet, happy little Celeste. It must have taken place whilst he and the boys were up country trapping; and yet why did not Marie notice such a state of affairs?

"Marie," he said. "This man—he must be near somewhere. Did she never mention any man—any new friend?"

Marie shook her head.

"She came home once, very strange, and ask me if I ever love a man, and I say 'no.' But that was all. I never thought——"

Paul's eyes suddenly glittered. He remembered a slight incident of only yesterday, of which he thought nothing at the time.

"By Gar!" he ejaculated. "The letter—she had a letter—she hide it from me when I ask what it was, and then laugh, just like she was glad, but now I see it was not joy——"

Lestrangle's mouth hardened.

"There were leetle pieces of paper where I found her," he muttered. "Leetle pieces——"

The priest suddenly appeared with solemn face Celeste gave a little cry, and Paul gripped the back of a chair. Lestrangle opened his mouth to frame a question, but no sound came.

"She is gone," said the priest.

"Gone!"

"Yes. But she goes with a clean heart and conscience. There is no further need of me my brothers. I join you in your sorrow. Remember, that all things are God's. I am sorry there was no time to call you. She simply fell asleep." He patted Marie on the shoulder. "Be brave, Marie, and at least

keep your heart free of the passion for revenge, which is so clearly exercising the minds of your father and brothers."

Paul and Pierre looked at each other, but said nothing. Old Lestrangle made a queer noise with his lips. Marie's little figure tightened up, and her eyes flashed as she replied in French.

"An eye for an eye—a tooth for a tooth. *Mon Dieu!* You ask me to forget. You do not understand."

"I think I do, my child. But God's ways are unfathomable."

"God! Do not speak of God," growled Pierre. "We shall find the man, and then——"

The priest shook his head and pulled the woollen muffler closer round his throat, as he stepped towards the door. He hesitated there for a moment, and then sighed and went out. Marie and her father went to the inner room, and Pierre looked at Paul.

"The letter," he said. "If we could find it—you said——"

"Yes—the letter was from him. The little pieces of paper our father saw—it may be she tore it up before she—come, we find them."

The pair slipped on their fur coats, and left the shack. Half an hour later they returned very grim and silent. As soon as they entered the door, Marie knew that something important had happened.

"Where you been?" she asked.

"By the river," replied Paul. "We have seen the letter—and now we know—*sacre!*"

Lestrangle rose to his feet as Paul produced eight small pieces of paper, and laid them on the table in their correct order. His eyes blazed with hate, as he read the pencil message.

DEAR CELESTE,

What is done is done. It cannot be helped. I think we were both mistaken in believing that we loved each other. It must be good-bye as I return East in a few days. You know I am sorry for you, but to marry you would only bring misery to us both. Do not come to the hut again, it is better that we see no more of each other.

JACOB DELL.

Paul took the pieces of paper, and placed them in his pocket. Marie looked at Pierre whose face was convulsed. It was clear enough now. She remembered Dell—a middle-aged man, who was surveying the country for a new railway company that was contemplating the construction of a track, from Winnipeg to Edmonton, via Prince Albert—a scheme that was destined to end in smoke, like so many similar schemes of that day. Lestrangle touched Paul and Pierre on the shoulder, and beckoned them towards the inner room.

"Come," he said. "We will talk."

Marie looked at him interrogatively, but he avoided her curious eyes, and led the way into the room, Pierre and Paul following. They seated themselves at a table not far from the mortal remains of Celeste and her unborn child.

"To-night I go up the river ——" said Lestrangle.

"No!" The ejaculation came from Pierre. His father surveyed him and nodded his head.

"Yes, to-night," he reiterated.

"It is I who will go," said Pierre. "I have the strong arm—the keen knife. You are old, mon pere."

Paul disagreed. Pierre was clumsy he argued, slow to action. Now he, Paul, knew the hut where Dell lived quite well. Who could better redress this wrong than Paul, the swift of foot and keen of eye. Lestrangle shook his head, but both boys were equally obdurate. After ten minutes' vain argument from three sides Paul made a suggestion.

"The dice," he said. "He who throws highest to go."

Pierre nodded, trusting that his usual good luck with dice would hold on this occasion. Lestrangle demurred, but at length was cajoled into acquiescence. He opened a drawer under the table, and took out a set of dice, and a wooden cup.

"Who throws first?" he asked.

"Paul."

"No, you Pierre."

"I t'row last," growled Pierre. "And I shall t'row highest."

"Take the cup, Paul," said Lestrangle.

Paul hesitated, and then picked up the cup. He gave it a quick swirl, and threw the ebony squares on to the pinewood table. The eyes of Pierre and his father followed them as they rolled, and then came to rest.

CHAPTER V

A NEW QUEST

O'NEILL came back to Regina to hear the most astounding news—Flood had escaped with his confederate. A squadron of troopers had been dispersed to the four quarters of the compass, but after a day's searching all came back to report failure. Ashton, furious with the guard, and bitterly disappointed, sent warnings over the wire to the scattered stations, and hoped for the best.

"I knew it," growled Rodd. "I had a hunch he'd vamoose. Why, that guard ain't fit to keep tame kittens. Why in hell didn't they let me plug him? It ain't in the nature of things that lambs can keep a holt on a rattler. Huh!"

"How did he get away?" queried O'Neill.

"Filed through his chain, and walloped the corporal on the head with it. Then waited for the next, and did ditto—changed clothes, and just walked out of barracks—the pair of 'em. Gee! It gets my goat to think how easy it would have been to plant a .450 right in his gizzard. Now what's to be done—I ask you, siree?"

"Round him up again, I suppose," mused O'Neill.

"I wonder where he got the file."

"Dunno—don't care," retorted the disgruntled Rodd. "O'Neill, I'm sure sick of this barrack life. I'd rather be mushing—anywhere. I'm getting fat."

O'Neill gazed at the lean, angular figure and laughed.

"There's a chance for you yet, Rodd," he remarked.

"The Crees are making war on the Blackfeet again. There's a squadron going up country."

"I don't want to shoot injuns," growled Rodd.

"It's too much like taking candy from babies. Now Flood and his gang is a different prop'sition——"

"Trooper O'Neill !"

O'Neill turned at the sound of the voice, and beheld the sergeant standing in the door.

"Colonel wants you."

"O'Neill sighed and went out. He found Ashton and Wren together, the former walking up and down with short rapid strides, as he was wont to do when unduly perturbed. He stopped as O'Neill entered and saluted.

"Ah—O'Neill. There's trouble up North. A man has been murdered at a place called St. Claire, south of Fort Carlton. Do you know it ?"

"No, sir."

"Well, you'll find it. I want you to take charge of this case. I've no time to go into details—better take those papers. They are the depositions of various people relative to the crime. There is not much evidence to go upon. This seems to be the only thing of value, extracted by the doctor at Battleford."

He handed O'Neill a flattened bullet. The latter turned it round in his fingers.

"May I retain this, sir ?"

"Yes. The man was an official of this new railway company—the Canadian Northern Ltd.—and the matter is therefore of some importance. It was because of that, that I took it out of the hands of our people at Battleford. I think you are the man to get to the bottom of it."

"Thank you, sir. When can I start?"

"As soon as you have made yourself acquainted with the evidence—such as it is. Better take a good man with you. Bring me the papers before you leave."

"Very good, sir."

Rodd had gone on a parade, when O'Neill returned to the hut. He sat on his bed, and read through the brief, and unilluminating documents. As Ashton had said the evidence was scanty. Jacob Dell had been found shot through the lungs in a hut a mile outside St. Claire, by his assistant, one George Rawlings. Dell had only lived two minutes after Rawlings' appearance on the scene—just time enough to explain that his assassin was short and dark, and wrapped in furs from head to foot. Dell had drawn his revolver immediately upon seeing the armed intruder, and had fired almost simultaneously, but whether his bullet had taken effect he could not say. Questioned by Rawlings as to whether he suspected anyone, the dying man nodded his head and tried to speak, but died before he could utter the name. The other evidence was formal and practically useless.

O'Neill made a few notes, and then returned the documents to Ashton. He found Rodd engaged on a task that threatened to break that worthy's heart—carrying coal.

"Rodd!" he called. "Put down that bucket—you're wanted."

Rodd wiped his dusty brow and stared.

"Who wants me?" he gurgled.

"I do. Come on—the corporal knows."

Rodd followed O'Neill into the hut, and gazed in astonishment at the packages on the latter's bed.

"What are you framing for—desertion?" he asked.

"Pack up," ordered O'Neill. "We're hitting the trail in an hour for St. Claire." |

Rodd uttered a wild whoop of delight, and his glum face relaxed into a grin, as he held out his hand.

"Put it right there, pard. I sure was near suicide jest now. But what do we do at St. Claire, anyway? It's a one-eyed place full of breeds and Frenchmen, who love policemen like a broncho does buffalo breeches. Wal, it don't matter none, so long as we git out of this doggone place. Coal-carting—well, I ask you!"

"How you talk," sighed O'Neill.

"And how do we go?" queried Rodd. "Horses or dogs?"

"Dogs."

"Yep—they're best on that trail I guess. I'll be ready in five minutes. Gee! I feel young again. What with carrying coal, looking after injun prisoners, mounting guard and scrubbing floors, I'm jest that much overgorged with it all, I'd bust if you pricked me. What are we after anyway—whisky distillers, cattle runners, or some guy who has a hunch he can start a republic with the aid of God Almighty and a few redskins—like Louis Riel. Did you ever meet

Louis Riel ? Gosh, he was some bird. They hanged him in the barracks. But I'm telling you this won't be no joy-trip——"

O'Neill waved his hand, and silenced the garrulous Rodd, who was snatching miscellaneous articles from his kit-bag and making a rapid selection.

"Hurry up," said O'Neill. "I'm going for a dog-team."

He was returning across the parade ground with half a dozen fierce malemutes, harnessed to a substantial wooden sleigh with broad runners, when he ran into Marcia.

"I brought your horse back safely," she said.

"Thank you. I hope he behaved well."

"Splendidly. Are you going up country with the squadron ? "

"No."

She opened her eyes in surprise.

"I'm detailed for a special job," he said.

"Far ? "

"Not very."

She bit her lips. Why couldn't he volunteer some information as to his movements. It hurt her to feel that he was deliberately keeping things from her. Was she not part and parcel of the Corps ?

"A man-hunt I suppose ? "

"Something like that, Miss."

There was something about the "miss" that rankled. Her eyes flashed.

"I hope you get your man," she said coldly, "and thus maintain your reputation of infallibility."

"Thank you. I hope I shall."

"You usually do."

"I admit I have a weakness that way," he said.
"It's just luck, attempting to make up deficits."

She laughed softly.

"I shouldn't have thought there was any deficit in your case, O'Neill. You always succeed. I pity the man—or woman—who gets in your line of advance. Have you ever captured a woman?"

He avoided her glance, and stared at the far horizon.

"I oughtn't to have asked that," she said. "It was almost as indiscreet as asking if a woman had ever captured you."

He turned and fixed her with his steady eyes.

"Not in the sense you mean," he said almost brusquely. "Excuse me!"

His hands tightened on the reins, and the long whip cracked and curled over the backs of the impatient team. With a double-barrelled "woof" the leader dog pawed at the snow, and the sleigh moved forward.

Rodd was ready by the time O'Neill had drawn rations, and placed them in the sleigh along with sundry other gear including sleeping bags and a small folding tent with iron pegs. Bramble, Fortesque and a dozen other men foregathered to bid them "good journey." Rodd seated himself in the sleigh whilst O'Neill took the reins.

"Whither away?" queried Bramble.

"Northward Ho!"

"Is it Flood again?" asked Fortesque.

"Nope," retorted Rodd. "It's hell. Let her go, O'Neill."

Crack! They were off, rounding the corner in

fine style, and bumping over a hummock in a way that threatened to crack Rodd's long backbone.

They struck the lonely trail for the North. The sun was nearing the horizon, and all the snow between it and the voyageurs was crimsoning visibly. It grew purple as the red orb dipped below the land line, and out of the North came the first flickering bow of the Aurora Borealis.

"Look at that," muttered Rodd. "It makes me feel great."

"And it makes me feel small," returned O'Neill.

CHAPTER VI

OUTSIDE ST. CLAIRE

THE journey across the plains was destined to live for ever in the memories of O'Neill and his companion. Day after day the sun shone with merciless glare from the steely-blue heavens, and the great cold increased. For eight days the travellers slept in their clothes, huddled up close to the oil stove, which seemed to be utterly devoid of heat. The sleeping bags, plus buffalo coat and several extra shirts made no difference. Through all these the cold penetrated like a knife. The thermometer sunk to minus thirty, then forty, then fifty.

"Eighty degrees of frost," quoth Rodd. "Gee! it's nearly as cold as it was on Pelly River in '84. I remember——"

Rodd always remembered an occasion when conditions were worse. His was the temperament that refused to accept anything of the moment as a record, whether of heat, cold, rain, or snow. Rodd could always find something to beat it in the dim and distant past.

"Now on Pelly River in '84," he muttered from behind his scarf, "she went down to sixty-five below with a hell of a blizzard on top of that."

"I'll accept the sixty-five below," replied O'Neill, "but not the blizzard at that temperature. Throw over that tent peg."

"That ain't a tent peg," growled Rodd. "It's a beef steak got loose."

They eventually got the tent up, hammering the steel pegs into the frozen earth. Rodd kindled a fire, whilst O'Neill found the provisions that were to form their evening meal. They sat in the shelter of the tent like two bears, eating with gloved hands, their noses skinned by the wind and the glare of the sun. They had discarded the snow spectacles days before, as the metal rims burnt their faces. A substitute was found in lamp-black, rubbed under the nose and eyes, for it was here that the merciless rays of the sun, reflected by the snow, played most havoc.

"We'll be there to-morrow," said Rodd.

"St. Claire?"

"Yep." He was silent for a moment. "O'Neill, I gotta hunch we're on a wild-goose chase this trip."

O'Neill said nothing.

"This yere murder," resumed Rodd. "What have you got to go on—nothin'. Someone gets plugged and dies—wal that's nacheral anyway. There's three hundred people in St. Claire, and any one of them might have done it. Evidence, clues—there ain't none. No, siree. What's more, they're French, and don't cotton on much to troopers of the N.W.M.P. When they see us bunch in they'll stick together like glue, and we won't get a scent of any clues—not much."

O'Neill sipped the hot coffee, and kicked at the fire. Rodd shrugged his shoulders.

"I wish you'd talk," he said. "O'Neill, how many words have you spoken since we left Regina? You're as glum as a funeral. Now there's something good in chin-music up here in the wilderness."

The only part of O'Neill's face that was visible relaxed in a smile.

"I'm sorry, Rodd—I was thinking. It makes you think when you face your last adventure."

"Last what?"

"I forgot to tell you that my five years are up in a month's time."

Rodd whistled.

"You don't tell me you're throwing over the Corps!"

"I am."

"But why? You ain't sick of it?"

"No. But circumstances make it imperative. I've other work to do."

"I reckon it must be darned important to come before the N.W.M.P."

"It is."

Silence reigned. O'Neill sat gazing into the fire. For the first time in five years he was within a mile or two of a place that aroused painful memories—the "Forks" of the Saskatchewan. He was aware that Rodd was surveying him curiously.

"Have you ever killed a man, Rodd?" he asked suddenly.

"Me—aw, yes—once I shot a cattle rustler down in Arizona—got him right over the heart."

"How did it feel—afterwards?"

"Afterwards? Search me—I can't remember. I think I got drunk."

"Five years ago, Rodd, I killed a man within a few miles of this spot. He deserved it—although I didn't mean to kill him. I think that wouldn't have worried me—but he left a child—a boy."

Rodd opened his eyes.

"Carry on," he said.

"The boy is now eight years old. It's that boy that worries me, Rodd. I've got to do something for him. He is my responsibility—as much as if he were my own. That's why I'm leaving the police."

"And what then. I don't see that that cuts any ice."

"It may not. If the boy were mine, would I leave him up here with an Indian guardian, uneducated, motherless, fatherless, to be damned for ever? Would you, Rodd? Hasn't he a right to more than that?"

Rodd demurred. His was not a very sentimental nature, but he saw the problem as it presented itself to O'Neill.

"Who was the man?" he asked.

"Hans Christiansen—a Swede.

"Christiansen! Good God! You needn't worry much about him. I reckon you deserve a front seat in heaven for putting Christiansen where he belongs. But the boy—yep, I guess you're right about the kid. How'd you come to kill Christiansen?"

O'Neill's eyes blazed as he recalled the incident.

"I was up in the Duckwood Hills, when I fell across Christiansen," he said. "He was trading

with a party of Crees—tea and tobacco in exchange for skins. There was an oily old scoundrel—a kind of Sachem of the tribe whom they called ‘The Crow’ present. He wanted whisky—was willing to sell his soul for it. Christiansen had half a demi-john with him and knew its value. There was a young Indian girl in the lodge—Summer Moon—the daughter of ‘The Crow.’ She came out in the middle of the rum-pus. Christiansen saw her—feasted his sensuous eyes on her fresh beauty. Well, you know what Christiansen was—the whisky and Summer Moon changed owners.”

Rodd’s black-rimmed eyes flashed.

“Aw—I get you,” he muttered.

“You can picture the alarm of Summer Moon—a proud, pure-blooded Indian, sold to a scoundrel like that. She went down on her knees and begged ‘The Crow’ to call off the bargain, but the old man had already tasted the ‘fire-water’—Christiansen took her away, kicking and struggling.”

“And then ? ”

“The same evening I took her from Christiansen. I brought her down to the ‘Forks’ where she found her brother, who was setting some traps. She stayed with him and I went on to McMahon’s store. Christiansen had got there before me. We quarrelled and the result was—a fatherless boy. I took him to Summer Moon and made straight for Winnipeg, where I joined up. She and her brother have since lived apart from the tribe. They came to Buffalo Lake the next Spring so that the boy might be near me. They are there now.”

“So that’s where you used to go at times ? ”

"Yes. I wanted to see how the boy was getting on. Thank God he is not like his father. They taught him English as best they could, but now their guardianship must finish, for the boy's own good. I must do something for him—something to make amends."

It provided Rodd with food for reflection. He guessed now the reason of O'Neill's extraordinary haste. This was to be his last adventure and he had but a few weeks to "get his man." Certainly, time was precious, for as far as Rodd could see, O'Neill had no chance of succeeding on this particular quest. Yet he could not imagine O'Neill failing. There was something about him that inspired the fullest confidence.

"Looks like we'll have to hustle some," said Rodd.

"Yes. To-morrow we'll sum up the evidence."

"Aye, and the next day we'll probably be under the snow with perforations all over us. Look you, O'Neill—I ain't complaining—oh, no. There's nothing I want more than to get going with a six-shooter on something. But once we set foot in St. Claire those Frenchies will close up like oysters. Maybe we'll have to arrest the whole darn colony."

"Perhaps—but I think not. In the first place, Rodd, you are going to be a decoy."

"Oh, am I?" growled Rodd. "And what's that anyway?"

"You will camp outside the colony and flout your authority as a custodian of the law."

"And what about you—ain't you in it at all?"

"Yes. But I'm going to enter St. Claire as an

ordinary trapper. Whilst they are concentrating all their attention on you, as a much-hated policeman trying to arrest one of their tribe, I may pick up a few clues."

"Sounds all right," mused Rodd. "But how're you going to——"

"The parcel in the sleigh, in which you have evinced such interest, contains my—disguise."

Rodd gave a little hiss of excitement, and surveyed O'Neill carefully.

"What about your hair—Trooper O'Neill is about the only red-haired man in the district I guess."

"They won't see much of my hair, Rodd—I'll risk it. To-morrow morning we part company; you for the river bank, outside the settlement, me for the settlement."

"Who takes the dogs?"

"You. I'll travel on snow-shoes, with a pack and the usual gear."

"And what do I do—sit on my haunches and grow blue?"

"If necessary."

Rodd looked down-hearted. He had an idea his job was going to be unusually tame—a poor reward after travelling over two hundred miles and suffering from frost-bite and a dozen other minor bodily discomforts.

"Wal, it's your funeral," he growled. "What you says goes, but if there's going to be any gun-throwing I'm in it."

"Of course. I'll come to you every evening and we'll compare evidence. First of all we've

got to examine the shack along the river where the killing took place, then we'll decide our next step."

Rodd nodded and put more wood on the fire.

Half an hour later dogs and men were asleep in the intense soul-disturbing silence of the sub-arctic night.

CHAPTER VII

A CLUE

IN a small shack a mile above St. Claire, a smart young man was busy fastening the last strap on his packs. He scratched his head as he surveyed the big heap of luggage, and wondered how much the "freighter" in St. Claire would charge per pound to transport it across the frozen wilderness to the railway. Then he commenced whistling as he realised that very soon he would be eastward bound with all the discomforts of the North vanishing behind him.

A knock sounded on the door, and in response to his vociferous "come in" a heavily-laden figure entered. He carried on his back sufficient gear to fill a small railway van, with various appendages strapped to his waist. He unbuckled the snow-shoes and kicked them across the room, then loosened his pack and let it slide to the ground.

The young man surveyed him with a smile, and held out his hand, which was gripped tight in the huge mitt of the intruder.

"Making St. Claire?" queried Rawlings.

"Yes. I lost the trail and thought you might be able to put me right."

"Pleasure. You've only to follow the river. St. Claire lies just off it on the south side, a mile lower down."

The visitor—in other words O'Neill—glanced at the pile of gear on the floor.

"Making out?" he queried.

"Yes, thank God. I ought to have gone a month ago but our work wasn't through."

"Our?"

Rawlings nodded his head and pursed his lips.

"There were two of us—my chief and self. Well, he's gone now. I suppose I ought to spill a tear, but it's not easy, considering that I'm about to slip into his job. Ah, well—one man's meat is another man's poison."

He handed O'Neill his tobacco pouch and the latter proceeded to fill and light a pipe. He puffed away until the weed was burning well, and then remarked casually: "Your chief is dead—I take it?"

"Yes—he's dead all right and buried. He died just where I am standing now." He shrugged his shoulders. "Someone had a grudge against him I reckon—they got him first shot."

O'Neill nodded imperturbably.

"Haven't they found the murderer?"

"No. And they won't. The police have got the matter in hand, but no one has turned up yet. I reckon the chap is out of Canada by this time—and good luck to him."

"Eh!"

"Perhaps I oughtn't to have said that, but that's how I feel. You can take it from me that Dell

only got what he deserved. Who did it I don't know. I came back from Prince Albert and found Dell just here, with a hole in his chest, breathing his last. He tried to tell me who he thought it was—when it was too late. Silly chump should have told me that at first and left out the details. Anyway he's gone, and all I'm sorry for is his wife and kids."

"That's pretty rough!"

"In a way, but she's well rid of him. What did they used to teach me at school. '*De mortuis nil nisi bonum*'—we'll leave it at that."

O'Neill looked round the place casually. It comprised two rooms, the one in which he now sat, and a smaller one immediately behind it. On the right of the door was a small window, one of the panes of which was broken, giving access to any icy draught, whenever the wind blew, despite the piece of cardboard which had—apparently recently—been propped against it. A rough pine table and two windsor chairs were the sum total of the furniture.

"A home from home," said Rawlings with a laugh. "We found it empty and bagged it as headquarters. Anyway it was better than nothing."

He turned his head as the tinkle of sleigh bells was heard from outside.

"More visitors," he muttered. "The place is getting popular." He went to the window. "By jove, it's a policeman, judging by his busby, with a dog-team. More details—oh Lord!"

A minute later Rodd entered. He looked at O'Neill, and nodded.

"George Rawlings?" he queried.

"Not guilty."

"I'm Rawlings," put in the young surveyor. "I take it you are a policeman."

"Right first time. I bunched in to have a slant at the scene of the crime before I arrest the guy that did it."

Rawlings laughed amusedly and Rodd glared at him.

"Was that funny?" he snorted.

"Very. Anyhow, here's the room—there's the door where the murderer entered and here, where I am standing, is the place where Jacob Dell gave up the ghost. Have a good look round—the murderer may be hiding here now for all I know."

"Maybe," drawled Rodd, staring straight into Rawlings' eyes.

"What!" gasped that worthy. "Good God, you don't think——!"

"Wal, it might be young feller. But don't try getting fresh with the police. Anyway, I'll give you the benefit of the doubt. You're too pretty to arrest. Anything to add to your deposition?"

"No."

"All right—I'm through with you."

O'Neill smiled and Rawlings shrugged his shoulders.

"D'you mind if I leave you?" he queried, "I've got to fix up a freighter to take my gear and me down to Regina."

"You can beat it," replied Rodd. "I guess I can straighten this out all right."

Rawlings put on his coat and turned to O'Neill with an inviting glance.

"I'll rest a bit," whispered O'Neill. "I'd like to see how this fellow gets to work."

"He's wasting his time here," muttered Rawlings, and with a nod went out. Rodd grinned and came across to O'Neill.

"Well, here we are, pard. So this is where they put one over Master Dell!"

O'Neill said nothing. He was busy with a jack-knife, extricating something from the wall behind him. At length he held it in the palm of his hand—a .350 bullet, flattened and discoloured. His eyes lighted up as he turned it over.

"Found it first time," he muttered.

"So you expected to hit on that?"

"Of course. Dell said he fired his revolver. The bullet had to go somewhere."

"Yep—I never thought of that. Anyway it don't cut much ice," growled Rodd.

O'Neill gave a short laugh.

"It cuts more ice than you think, Rodd. Did you ever see a bullet that has come through part of a human body?"

"Not much. I never was a curious kind o' animal—but you don't mean——?"

"This one passed through flesh. It came from Dell's weapon beyond a doubt. Dell was at the table and his visitor was just inside the door. There's your line of fire. Taking the murderer to be short, as stated, it got him somewhere about the waist line. If it hit him fair it would have killed him—certainly have put him out of action. Moreover, a soft lead bullet wouldn't have gone through him. So it is evident it merely grazed him one side or the other."

Rodd nodded and slapped his leg excitedly. O'Neill

pushed him towards the door, in front of the hole in the timber.

"Stand there," he said. "I want to be sure on one point."

He stepped back to the table and stood exactly where Rawlings had said Dell had been found. Rodd moved to the left at a word from O'Neill bringing the bullet mark to his right side.

"That's it—right side."

"How in hell do you know that?"

"It's only a guess—but it should prove correct. To get the bullet on his left side he would have had to move away from his victim on entering the door. Why should he do that?"

"I reckon you're right. Gee—that's a good clue!"

"It helps. Firstly, we have to find a man who owns a revolver with a .350 calibre; secondly, that man must bear a slight wound in his right side near the waist."

"Why it's easy," cried Rodd. "We'll turn out the whole population and make 'em parade in their never-nevers."

O'Neill came across and sat down. It was evident from his expression that he did not regard the situation in the same light as Rodd.

"It's not so easy," he mused. "Assuming it was done by a man in St. Claire, it's going to be difficult to get him. I understand that the late Jacob Dell was not a very good specimen of the Anglo-Saxon race, and the chances are that he was killed out of revenge. You know as well as I do, the clannishness of the French-Canadian."

"Oh, they'll sure stick us rather than give up one

of their people, you can bank your shirt on that. But we've got to get him."

"Yes, we'll get him," said O'Neill. "The first thing is to discover the motive."

"I thought the first thing was to find a fellow with a .350 gun plus a new scar," argued Rodd.

"How can you do that unless you have some idea who the man is. Rodd, it's going to be rather dull for you at first."

Rodd nodded his head gloomily.

"I knew it," he growled. "Go on, tell me what kind of nursery game I'm detailed for."

"You are the decoy."

"I hate that word."

"You'll hate it worse before you've finished. It's obvious that a man in your position will learn nothing——"

"My position!"

"Yes. When the population of St. Claire hears that a policeman is camping outside their gates waiting to pounce on one of their brothers, do you think they will welcome him with open arms? I have an idea, Rodd, that you are going to be cordially disliked."

"Yep—I gotta hunch you ain't far wrong. See here, O'Neill, I ain't complaining, but if anyone starts gun-throwing or other kind of hoss-play, there's no reason why Hiram Rodd shouldn't butt in jest for the sake of relaxation."

"Not a bit. But in the meantime, Rodd, just go warily. They'll be antagonistic at first, till they find you haven't the brain of a louse."

"Eh—what!"

"Don't get excited. That's the part for you—a lean, over-zealous policeman, always finding wrong clues."

Rodd caught his breath in amazement. This was beyond endurance.

"Maybe I ain't a George Washington," he growled. "But darn me if I'm going to be labelled a bum policeman."

"My dear Rodd—they'll love you when they see how incompetent you are. Don't fret—I promise you some excitement before we finish."

Rodd sighed and spread out his hands. Argument was useless with O'Neill—moreover, a question of discipline was involved.

"I'll do it if it kills me," he said.

O'Neill nodded, and commenced to harness the huge pack to his back.

"By the way," he said, "my name is Shane, and I come from Moosejaw."

"Aw—I get you. You'll find me along the river at sundown," returned the disconsolate Rodd.

CHAPTER VIII

O'NEILL MEETS MARIE

IT was Pierre Lestrangle who brought the news to St. Claire. His sullen face was unusually animated as he entered the shack and flung down his cap.

"He is here," he grunted.

"Who?" queried Marie.

"The policeman."

Paul drank the last of his coffee and stood up. Marie's eloquent eyes opened wide and then contracted. She laughed lightly to cover her anxiety.

"It does not mattaire," she said. "He find noding."

Pierre scowled, and fingered the knife in his belt. Marie shook her head as she perceived the action.

"Pierre, mon cher—you mak' too much haste. You are lak the wolf—always ready to keel. Did we not say we forget everyt'ing now. It is over——"

Paul's face relaxed in a smile. During the past week his old gaiety had been flowing in. Poor Celeste lay under the snow on the hill. The gap that

she had left in their lives was already being closed up, for life was held somewhat lightly at St. Claire, where but a few years back, a terrible scourge of small-pox had almost halved the population.

Marie remembered that occasion only too well. The Indians had come out of the reservations literally eaten up with the terrible disease, swearing vengeance on the white man who had brought it among them. They tottered into St. Claire, swarmed round the doors of the houses, filled with but one desire—to make the white man taste his own medicine. They were driven back eventually—those who did not die in the streets—but too late to save 250 of the population of St. Claire. Marie lost a mother and two brothers, and scarcely a single family in the colony could boast of immunity.

Then there was Antoine who was frozen in the great blizzard whilst returning from Red River but last year, and little Lucille who died of consumption the previous winter. Thus of the eight children of Armand Lestrangé, but three remained. These recurring tragedies had left their mark on the heart of Marie. It brought her to realise the mercilessness of her environment. It taught her that death was always at hand—a mocking spectre moving amid the incomparable beauty of the North West. It hardened her, but paradoxically enough, it softened her at the same time, for out of the silence and death of Winter was born new life, urging, pushing up from beneath the snow to quicken as the Spring advanced and the birds came back. She became in tune with Nature, as alternately fierce and merciless, proud and impas-

sive, gay and compassionate, as the changing seasons themselves.

Paul, too, was of her own disposition, quick to anger but equally quick to forgive and forget. Pierre was totally different—a brooding man in whom the quality of mercy was unknown, and who let his hate overleap his reason. Marie knew that Pierre would have killed the squatting trooper of the police with no more compunction than he exhibited at shooting a badger. Moreover, Pierre hated the English.

“If he find out much I——” he growled.

Marie laid her hand on his arm, and regarded him whimsically.

“Let us forget.”

“Yes,” said Paul. “Marie she is right. This policeman he but do his duty. Maybe he t’ink himself clever, but we shall see.”

Pierre merely growled, and sat down by the stove. Paul put his arm round Marie’s waist, and pulled her hair playfully.

“Why you look leetle sad?” he asked.

“I am not sad. I t’ink of something Robert Ferris say. He guess about that night when——”

Paul put his finger on her lips, and his face grew a little grim.

“Robert knows,” he whispered. “Maybe many more know in St. Claire, that Celeste die by her own hand, and when the dog Dell die soon after they guess—but they will keep silent because they are our own people. Now say no more on that but laugh like Marie used to laugh.”

Marie nodded, and her red mouth opened and showed her gleaming small teeth.

"Soon the snow go, and the birds come back, and the woods grow pink with roses and white with bells, and then, *voilà!* our hearts are light," said Paul.

"But it is yet mid-winter."

"Out there, yes—but not in the heart if we wish it not. See, Pierre—poor Pierre he hate like the half-breed."

Pierre looked up from the corner, and took his long pipe from his lips.

"You are both children," he muttered, "and you see not peril until it grip you like this." He put out his long arms, and joined his strong fingers in a close grip. "If the policeman find out——"

"Oh, the policeman," retorted Paul impatiently, "he vill find out noding. Look you, is not a Frenchman as cunning as a policeman?"

"Tch! I tell you, you mak' too light of this policeman," retorted Pierre savagely. "You laugh—but you will not laugh if he discover that the one he seeks is in this house."

Marie turned pale, and Paul quickly took her in his arms, and glanced at his brother.

"Enough!" he cried. "When that day come we shall be ready."

"When that day come I shall keel him," said Pierre and sat down again, relapsing into a sullen silence.

* * * *

In the meantime, O'Neill had made himself acquainted with the colony—or camp—for it was scarcely more despite its dimensions. Two lines of

stout wooden houses, some twenty yards apart, formed the main street. Beyond them were rude erections, ranging from a mere framework of wood to tents. These latter were, in the main, the "homes" of young single men, who spent most of their summers in the far north—and some of their winters too. The population was two-thirds French, the remaining third being divided between French half-breeds and English half-breeds, with a smattering of other nationalities. Almost everyone lived by hunting, for all the land to the north abounded with game, from bears to beavers. Only a few engaged in the hazardous business of farming, and these had not been very successful, for the treacherous frost that followed close on the heels of the Indian summer played havoc with crops. Everyone spoke English—likewise everyone spoke French. Even the Indians who came down the river to trade were acquainted with both languages. Armand Lestrangé was one of those who seldom indulged in the tongue of the people whom he firmly believed had robbed France of a rich colony. But Armand was not typical of the people of St. Claire. Most of them took a pride in their mastery of Anglo-Saxon.

The "street" boasted a post office and an hotel—the latter a quaint combination of café, dance-hall, and general meeting-house. It boasted the title of "The Stars" hotel probably from motives of patriotism on the part of its proprietor, who hailed from Hoboken, but nevertheless ran his house in Christianlike fashion, keeping his ample stocks of whisky and rum well concealed.

It was to this queer individual, Hank Fenley, that

O'Neill went with a view to engaging a room, but after examining the only room that Fenley had to spare, he came to the conclusion that a tent under the free heavens was infinitely preferable. He accordingly took Rodd's tent, and left that worthy to take up his abode in the derelict hut, which arrangement appeared to suit Rodd very well.

The next day found O'Neill quartered on the fringe of the woods above the colony. It was a picturesque spot, affording a view of the river on the one hand and of St. Claire, nestling in a kind of cup, on the other. The bitter wind had now vanished and existence took on a more pleasant aspect. He decided to spend the afternoon in laying in a store of wood and set off with the axe.

For two hours he worked among the pines, the ringing noise of the axe echoing through the woodland, bringing showers of snow from the upper branches—fine powdery stuff without an atom of the moisture that makes snow so unpleasant down East.

He was surveying the results of his labour when a slight noise met his ears. He peered through the trees and saw a brown shaggy form in the near distance. It moved round a tree and became lost to view. He hesitated for a moment and then ran towards camp, and came back with his rifle. Cautiously he made his way in the direction of the bear. He found the tree eventually, and a mass of foot-marks. A stick suddenly cracked within a few yards of him, and he stood stark still in the shelter of a huge pine and waited. The soft "pad-pad" came nearer, and he saw the steam-like emanation from the creature's throat.

Two seconds later it came to view, its big head rolling curiously from side to side. It was almost on him when he raised the rifle.

"Stop ! "

He started at the very moment of pulling the trigger, and beheld, to his amazement, a small hand reach out from the right paw and swiftly push back the ferocious muzzle, to expose the flushed face of a dark and beautiful girl, who stared at him, and then smiled.

"You t'ink I was the bear ? " she said.

"Great Scott! I nearly shot you," gasped O'Neill.

"Why do you masquerade like that ? "

"There is a beeg bear. He come here every day. He is so artful nobody get near him. My brother Paul he laugh and say no one ever get that bear. Then I sink I try lak' dis. He come to see dis oder bear. Then you speak and he go. You spoil it all, yes."

The music of her voice with its quaint French accent, and the soft light in her dark eyes held O'Neill spellbound. Even now she did not appear to realise how near death she had been. She began to remove the rest of the skin, displaying a supple sinuous form, clad in short coney coat, leggings, and moccasins.

"How were you going to kill the bear ? " queried O'Neill.

She walked to the tree behind which he had stood, and picked up a rifle from the other side of it.

"I was jus' going to get dis when I see you," she explained. "But what you do here ? I nevaire see you before."

"I was gathering wood—my camp is lower down—do you come from St. Claire ? "

"Yes. My name is Marie—Marie Lestrangle. My brudders live there too, and my fader—but he is now gone to Quebec—ah, m'sieur, why did you try to shoot me ? Two minutes, I should have got that bear, yes."

O'Neill shook his head and smiled.

"Perhaps it was as well. Bears are awkward customers to deal with. Particularly where ladies are concerned."

Marie's eyes flashed as she took this as a reflection upon her hunting ability.

"You are lak' all men—you t'ink a girl can do nussing. Oh, but I shall show you some oder day."

She put the bearskin down by the tree and heaped some snow over it.

"Now I go home," she said. "You come this way, too ? "

"Yes. Mademoiselle—— "

She laughed merrily.

"Mademoiselle—it sound so funny. Everyone here call me Marie."

O'Neill frowned. It was years since he had called a girl by her Christian name, and he felt a strange repugnance in repeating that — indiscretion. Marie was quick to see the slight movement of his mouth.

"Why you look lak' that ? " she queried.

"Like what ? "

"Lak' my brudder Pierre—cantankerous."

O'Neill laughed at the usage of the last word.

"You certainly speak English well, Miss—er—Marie."

Her eyes sparkled.

"You t'ink so? I am verra glad. I try so hard. Ah, now you can tell me. I ask everyone, and no one know. One day a man came to St. Claire—a scholar—and he use a strange word, he say *incomparable*."

O'Neill nodded.

"But that is wrong."

"No, quite good. Educated people invariably say *incomparable*."

She looked at him swiftly.

"Then you are—educated gentleman?"

"No—just a hunter."

"Then how you know?"

They had reached the camp, and O'Neill flung down the axe.

"I must have read it somewhere," he said. "Now can I offer you some tea, Miss—er—Marie. See the water is boiling, and I have good tea."

"Oh, I t'ink——"

"Come, you can't refuse to drink tea with a man who nearly shot you."

She laughed, blushed a little and then nodded. A few minutes later, they were sitting on a log drinking the hot beverage.

"You have not told me your name," she said.

"Pardon—It's Shane."

"Shane! How strange a name, but I tink I lak' him."

"*It*," he corrected.

"Yes, yes. 'Him' means you or someone else, is it not?"

"Probably someone else—in this case."

She was trying to puzzle this out when he took her cup, and refilled it, fearful lest she should interpret it correctly and abuse him with those beautiful eyes of hers.

"So you, too, are a hunter. You lay your traps in the North, yes?"

O'Neill nodded, and smiled grimly as he thought how apposite her remark was.

"Yes," he murmured. "I have laid my traps in the North."

CHAPTER IX

A WARNING

FOR the next few days Rodd was the talk of St. Claire. The whole colony turned out when the gawky trooper entered the "street." Rodd had a well-founded idea that a conspiracy was afoot to humiliate him. It seemed to him quite unnatural that people should rush to their door just because a policeman happened to walk into town. Nevertheless, he strove to maintain an expression of complete indifference and continued to haunt the neighbourhood—lounging up against doorways and dropping into "The Stars" hotel at all kinds of inopportune moments.

"This job's sure killing me, O'Neill," he complained.

"Nonsense. Look how friendly they are getting."

"Yep—they take me for the softest bum that ever wore the service button. When are we going to let loose."

O'Neill shook his head. Up to the present he had succeeded in discovering very little. People had a strange reluctance to mention the late Jacob Dell, and he was discreet enough not to push his inquiries too far.

"Go on acting, Rodd," he said. "Something will happen before long."

Rodd sincerely hoped it would, and it nearly did the next morning. Rodd was strolling along the street, the object of much interest of an exaggerated character, when a bearded man in a doorway grinned at him and whispered to a neighbour quite audibly.

"Is he not pretty? *Ma foi*—I could kiss him!"

Rodd swung round on the speaker, his eyes ablaze and his hand at his belt.

"Say that agin—and I'll knock seven different kinds of hell out o' you."

The man in the doorway stepped out, and a little hiss of excitement went up. He walked up to Rodd, and casually drew a long-bladed knife from somewhere inside his coat. Rodd's leather-like face tightened up. His eyes followed the weapon, as its owner executed a little circle with the point of it, and then flung it into the air. It turned several times, the sun gleaming on its polished blade. Its owner was waiting to catch it by the handle when Rodd's revolver went off, and the gleaming point of light moved across space. All eyes followed it until it completed its parabolic curve twenty yards away.

"*Mon Dieu!*"

"Yep, *mong jer*, it is your merry meat-carver. I'm passing you the buck not to get fresh with the N.W.M.P."

Rodd turned on his heel and walked on leaving the astonished citizens to discuss the matter. Feeling very sore, he strode into "The Stars" hotel. Hank Fenley, who had seen him coming, did something with a bottle, and winked at three or four men, who

promptly finished some liquid in their glasses. When Rodd entered Hank was busy putting a polish on the mirror.

"Hello, Constable!" he said.

"Say bo, where do you keep your whisky?" snapped Rodd.

"In the conservatory," replied Hank. "Shall I lead it out to you."

Rodd lolled up against the wall and rolled a cigarette with a dexterous movement of his fingers. He struck a match on the seat of his trousers and glared at a man who was evidently trying to be funny.

"Don't try to pull that stuff on me," he growled. "I ain't up here for my health you bet your life. There's bin dirty work round about and I gotta hunch the feller who put the surveyor through is right here in St. Claire."

"Why don't you get him then?" put in Hank with a smile.

"Maybe I ain't far from doing that," said Rodd. "Someone is going to laugh the other side of their jaw 'fore long."

At that moment O'Neill entered the bar. He glanced casually at Rodd, and nodded to Hank.

"Hi, you," said Rodd. "I've seen you somewhere before."

"Very likely."

"And I don't like your hair."

"Neither do I," replied O'Neill. "But it was all I could get."

Someone at the back laughed loudly, and Rodd jerked his head forward.

"Seems like I've struck a bunch of music-hall turns."

Anyway, I'm putting it to you, red-head—I don't like the way you prow around this yere camp. You just watch your step."

O'Neill shrugged his shoulders. It was obvious to him that Rodd was merely letting off a little steam, and it was doing no harm. On the contrary it fitted in very well with his plans.

"I fancy I've seen you before too," he replied. "I can't remember where, but if I do I'll drop along and let you know."

Rodd grunted and went out whilst O'Neill engaged in conversation with the company. He learnt very little from them, but he felt that already they were regarding him as one who disliked Rodd very much, and that fact relieved them of any suspicions they might otherwise have had.

Later in the day he encountered Pierre along the river, fishing in an ice-hole. The latter regarded him with his usually sullen stare and seemed not too pleased when O'Neill stopped and bade him good-day.

"Good fishing?"

"No," growled Pierre.

O'Neill looked towards Rodd's hut, which could just be seen among the firs.

"Is that where the policeman is living?" he queried.

Pierre nodded and prodded at the gathering ice over the black hole. His eyes flashed angrily at mention of Rodd.

"Was there really a murder in that hut or is the policeman engaged in some other quest?"

"What other quest?"

"Whisky smuggling perhaps."

"Would they send a policeman across the plains in winter m'sieur for the sake of smuggled spirits? No, no—he come to meddle with t'ings best left alone."

O'Neill was silent for a few minutes, then he remarked softly.

"I wonder if he really has a clue—or whether he was only boasting."

Pierre's thick eyebrows came down, and he gazed at O'Neill in astonishment.

"A clue!—*mais non*—it is impossible!"

"Oh, I don't know," replied O'Neill casually. "Murderers usually leave some clue behind them. I shouldn't be surprised if the policeman gets his man. He seems to be a determined sort of fellow."

Pierre gave vent to an expression of contempt.

"He vill discover noting. He is a fool—like all those policemen."

O'Neill chuckled.

"I think you are mistaken. Anyway, we shall see. But whoever the murderer is he deserves all he may get. I've no sympathy for a man who shoots another in the back."

Pierre swung round.

"In the back! He was shot in the chest. You do not understan—he was a dog. He flirt with women and break their hearts. In the back—*mon Dieu!*"

"I thought someone told me he was supposed to have been shot in the back. If you are sure he was shot in the chest it might have been suicide. Anyway its nothing to do with me."

"You seem verra interested," growled Pierre

glaring at O'Neill. "I geev you one advice, do not meddle or——"

"Or what?"

"Or we shall not like you verra mush. Many a man he die up here and no one know—*savez vous?*"

O'Neill frowned at the threat, but laughed it off easily. The conversation made certain things clear. Pierre knew who killed Jacob Dell, and for some reason best known to himself and some of the citizens of St. Claire, meant to prevent the arrest of the murderer. Moreover, Pierre trusted no one. He resented any reference to the tragedy, and was quite capable of "putting away" any person who might display any interest in the identity of the culprit. It was difficult to believe that he could be the brother of Marie Lestrangle whose disposition was so different. O'Neill had seen Marie several times since the meeting in the woods, and she had impressed him to an extent of which he was reluctant to confess. He found himself subconsciously comparing her with the cold, proud, superficial Marcia Ashton, and with a certain woman in the past—a cultured woman, who had accepted his kisses only to reveal to him, ultimately, a soul that was bereft of everything save vanity, selfishness, and the grossest materialism. This girl of the backwoods was somehow different. She looked at life from a different angle. Civilisation had not robbed her of much. Culture had not steeped her soul in a sea of artificialities. Marie was always her true self. She was like a breath of fresh pure air to him who was fast becoming misogynistic. Yet he was but half conscious of this, for he had almost succeeded in convincing himself that women were more

of a curse than a blessing—ruined by the flatteries and attentions of imprudent men.

He ran Rodd to earth that evening in the hut, and was surprised to find that worthy gazing at a crumpled sheet of paper on the table.

"Hello, boss," he growled. "What do you make of this?"

O'Neill scanned the letter. It commenced with "Dearest Jacob," and was full of lovers' endearments, quaintly phrased. The signature at the bottom was "Celeste."

"Pretty, ain't it?" said Rodd. "I found it behind the stove. Dell must have chucked it there."

"Celeste! I wonder who Celeste was?" muttered O'Neill.

"Sweetheart—you bet yer sweet life. But that ain't a nice way to treat honied documents. This yere Celeste would sure be pleased."

O'Neill put the letter in his pocket.

"Anyway it don't get us any forrader," said Rodd. "O'Neill, if we don't get some excitement soon I'll bust."

"Well, you can have a little run for your money to-night. You can make an arrest."

"Arrest! Who?"

"Me."

"I don't get you. What in——"

"Listen. Pierre Lestrangle is a little too suspicious for my liking. It's easy enough to bluff the others but Pierre is different. He doesn't connect me with you in any way, but he resents my interest in this affair. It might throw him off the scent a bit if you barged in and collared me."

Rodd's face fell. His hunger for excitement was not to be assuaged by a sham fight.

"What do I do then?"

"I'll tell you later. For God's sake look pleasant. I'll be in 'The Stars' hotel at seven o'clock to-morrow night."

"All right. But I reckoned I was through with this pantomime stuff—anyway what you says goes. O'Neill, can't you get some of those goats to butt in. Might jest as well make a night of it."

"You'll get a night of it later. Cheer up, Rodd—life in the N.W.M.P. isn't all arrests and glory."

"You're right. See here, O'Neill, I reckon it would have been straighter dealing if we had tossed for that job."

"What job?"

"I forget the word now, but I didn't like the sound of it the first time I heered it. Darn me if I thought it meant playing the giddy goat and being looked upon as a goddarn lunatic. *Mong jer*, as they say around here, I begin to wish I hadn't left Regina."

CHAPTER X

A LITTLE TALK

MARIE was sitting outside O'Neill's tent, her hands round her knees, gazing into the fire on which something was stewing. She had arrived at the psychological moment, and had saved the contents of the pot by pouring in a few handfuls of snow. She raised her head as a sound came from behind her, and stood up to see O'Neill enter the clearing with his arms full of wood.

"Miss Lestrangle!" he ejaculated.

"No, Marie."

"But I didn't know you were here. I am very pleased."

"You do not look pleased," she retorted. "Not even though I save your dinner from burning."

"I forgot all about it. Thank you."

He put down the logs and came towards her.

"More problems in Anglo-Saxon that need elucidation?" he asked.

"No. I come—jus' to see you—for why you laugh? I sink you are verra lonely out here, and I come to talk, and you laugh and look angry. Verra well—I do not vish——"

She strode away, but he ran forward and touched her on the arm.

"Marie, forgive me. I did not mean to be rude. The fact is I am a bit of a boor. A common wanderer who has forgotten his manners—I am not used to ladies—won't you stay?"

"If you will look more pleased."

"I'll try," he replied.

He attempted a jovial attitude, but it failed utterly, for something he had heard but an hour ago had aroused a painful suspicion in his breast. But for this Marie's presence would have been welcome enough. Now he felt mean, almost despicable. If his suspicion should prove well-founded it meant that he was at war with the family of Marie.

"For why you camp in the open?" she queried. "There is room in the town."

"I am used to it. I have camped like this for nearly ten years."

"Ten years, *ma foi*! You must be old."

"I am. Old and sour."

"No, not sour, but disappointed perhaps. And you are not old really, but you frown horribly. And why are you disappointed?"

The frank question put without the slightest hesitation or embarrassment surprised him.

"I did not say I was disappointed."

"Ah, but I know. When I first see you I say 'here is a disappointed man.' And I t'ink why you are disappointed. But I do not know because you seem so, so——"

"So—what?"

She spread out her hands and shrugged her shapely shoulders.

"I have not the word in English."

"Well, we'll have it in French."

"You understand the French?"

"Yes."

She smiled and shook her head.

"Then I will not tell you."

"Very well—it probably saves me a great amount of self-reproach, for I'm sure it would not be complimentary."

"Not a leetle bit," she said. "Oh, I will tell you—I come to see you because my brudder see me speaking to you and say I must not."

He raised his eyebrows.

"That sounds rather like a—paradox."

"I know him not—paradox. But it is true. I will not have him say I shall not speak to this or that—no, by Gar!" she said fiercely.

"Marie!"

"I know I swear, but he is jus' terrible. Sometime I t'ink he is not my brudder. He say, 'Speak to that man and I lock you in the bedroom all day!' *Sacre!* Why I not speak to who I lak'."

O'Neill stroked his chin.

"I seem to have a bad reputation, Marie," he mused. "I wish you had not come."

To his surprise she laughed lightly and turned her dark eyes full on him.

"I believe you are afraid of my brother. He is beeg and strong and might beat you. Yes."

"That would be most unfortunate," said O'Neill.

"Yes, most unfortunate," she repeated.

"—For him!" added O'Neill. "But seriously, Marie, he is a very ignorant brother not to cherish such a sister."

"Oh, Pierre is seek of sisters—he have so many." Her eyes softened suddenly. "But only I am left now. Since Celeste——"

"Celeste!" he ejaculated, then softly, "what a queer name."

"*Mais non*, it is common enough. But our Celeste was different. She was lak' a flower—so frail, so tender. She have a temper so sweet, she never swear—lak' me. And then, and then——"

"She died?"

Marie nodded, and a big tear gathered in her eye, but she brushed it away swiftly, and her small frame quivered with suppressed anger.

"Disease?"

"No—yes—the worse disease—love. She love a man—a dog—and he keel her."

"Marie—you don't mean——"

"Yes, he keel her jus' as sure as I sit here. He tell her he love her then . . . We bury her up there behind the copse where she gather flowers in spring——"

"Was it recently?" he queried.

"T'ree weeks."

O'Neill turned his face away. He had dreaded this confirmation of his suspicions. There was little room for doubting. Celeste had died of a broken heart, or suicide, and Jacob Dell had followed her to the grave. Who could have carried out this swift revenge but one of those to whom the girl was dear. Was it Pierre, Paul, or old Lestrangle? He could understand now Pierre's fierce aversion to Rodd, his suspicions of everyone, and everything. It rendered his duty most painful. How could he continue to meet the delightful Marie, talk with her, only to

swoop like a hawk upon one of her family. He began to wish he had come to St. Claire in his full colours, instead of masquerading in this fashion, winning her confidence only to abuse it in the interest of his calling.

"I should not have told you," she murmured.

"I wish to God you had not," he blurted out.

"But it is not a new story. The woman she give her love to the man, and the man play with her, and then leave her lak' the bee leave one flower for anoder. Is it not?"

O'Neill shook his head.

"You should not generalise, Marie. One man does not make mankind—not one woman either. That man was a skunk, but he has his feminine counterpart. The only difference is that men's hearts do not break—they set up a canker that is much worse."

She gave him a swift glance, the bitterness of his words leading her to believe that he was speaking of a personal experience.

"But no woman would pretend lak' that."

She saw his eyes flash, as they became focussed in space.

"You are so delightfully innocent, Marie," he murmured. "Perhaps it's because you live here, where Nature predominates and truth comes out of the well. Why, I knew a woman once who gained a man's love. He believed her to be the sweetest and gentlest thing in the world. He built high on that—delusion. Her very name was sacred on his lips, and never a day passed but he thanked God for life—and love."

He stopped and the interested eyes of Marie swept his features.

"Is that all?"

"No—not quite. A crash came—something quite unexpected. It was merely a question of money—the closing up of a bank ; and the poor fool of a lover considered it nothing very much, but to the woman it was everything. So the fool went packing with an empty heart and a distorted brain."

"And then ? "

"And then—delirium, downfall. Five years ago he died and was buried."

"Buried ? "

He nodded.

"Then it was not you ? " she ejaculated.

"Me ? Oh, no—someone I knew long ago—a man named Gorringe. A wanderer on the face of the earth—a 'freighter'—a drunkard, and a wastrel."

"And the woman ? "

"I believe she married another man—a rich man—just three months after Gorringe disappeared."

Marie sat in stony silence. She wondered why this incident affected O'Neill so deeply, but ascribed it to the fact that the dead man had been his friend.

"I merely wanted to show you that every case has its parallel somewhere, Marie."

"Yes. I wish you never tell me that story. It mak' me t'ink there is no love—noding but lies, lies, lies. And yet——"

She did not complete the sentence, though he waited in silence. She merely glanced at him, and then let her eyes fall as though she were afraid he might read something in them that she would fain keep secret.

Later he walked with her to the fringe of the colony. She had already forgotten their rather pessimistic conversation, and her naturally gay temperament was

exerting itself under the influence of the incomparable sunset, which was performing its evening miracle, over the snowbound land.

"Now I go to my scolding," she said, with a laugh. "I shall say I have talked with the bad man of the river, and Pierre he swear horribly. Ah, *mon ami*, you are lucky not to have so rebellious a sister."

"I think I am most unfortunate."

"La, la—you do not mean that—*bon soir!*"

She laughed, and then ran swiftly towards the township. O'Neill stood like a statue watching her figure until it disappeared in the gloaming.

CHAPTER XI

FLOOD TAKES A HAND

THAT evening was destined to be quite a memorable one in the history of St. Claire. Fenton exhibited a huge poster outside "The Stars" hotel announcing that as it was Christmas Eve there would be a fete and "drinks were on him." The large room behind the bar, usually reserved for card games and roulette, was cleared out, the floor swept clean, and an orchestra imported for the occasion. The latter consisted of one violin, a much out-of-tune piano, and a clarionette.

"The whole darn boiling's free," quoth Hank. "Put it round that everyone is welcome barring breeds—I won't have no breeds bunching in—no, sir, they ain't human."

The news had been "put round" and by half-past-six there was a fine assembly. Hank had done his "best" for the occasion, and beamed behind the huge cigar as he welcomed his guests. Pierre, wearing a more than usually brilliant sash, and looking a trifle less ferocious than was his wont, escorted the bright-eyed Marie into the dance room. The latter was packed to excess—and shimmering with somewhat gaudy colour. Marie contributed to the spectru-

matic effect to the extent of a yellow dress a little out of date, but nothing could rob her of her beauty. Her dark eyes were sparkling with joy, and her raven tresses coiled round her small pink ears and formed thick gleaming bands about her proud head. Most of the girls were dark and pretty but they all lacked the personality that seemed to radiate from Marie.

The orchestra commenced to play and the company sorted themselves into couples. Pierre, who hated dancing, sat in a chair near the refreshment counter and watched Marie swinging round on the arm of a tall young fellow who danced with all the grace of a professional. Hank, after a few minutes' absence, during which he managed to dilute half a dozen innocent-looking "drinks" from a long black bottle, returned and winked his eye as he passed them along to his intimate friends who interpreted the wink quite correctly.

"This yere show'll cost me a couple of hundred," said Hank, "but it's money well spent. I like to see young people getting merry. Orangade all right?"

Pierre's leathern face relaxed into a smile, but it tightened again a second later as his eyes fell on the figure of O'Neill framed in the doorway. Hank followed his glance.

"That fellow from up the river. Wal, he don't seem a bad sort—he's welcome. Gee—but you're looking fierce! Got something against him?"

Pierre shook his head. He was finding it difficult to understand his antagonism to O'Neill. Intuitively he felt that danger lay there, but it was not the real danger that caused him to be wary. He had an idea that the big, red-haired stranger was occupying

Marie's thoughts to a greater extent than was desirable. But an hour ago he had reprimanded his sister for exhibiting an unseemly interest in the man. In the absence of old Lestrangle he took it upon himself to act as guardian. The idea of Marie falling in love with a foreigner was gall to him. He hated Americans, Englishmen, everyone except his own countrymen—the rightful owners of Canada.

The waltz finished and Marie came across to Pierre. Her tall dancing partner hung in the near vicinity hoping that the next dance would commence before another man booked the incomparable girl. But he was doomed to disappointment, for the roving eyes of Marie fell on the broad figure of O'Neill. Pierre saw her lips quiver and he cursed beneath his breath. O'Neill had commenced to walk across when the orchestra started. Pierre jumped up and caught his sister by the arm.

"I will dance this one, Marie."

Her face fell.

"But I——"

He looked her straight in the eyes.

"You wish to dance with that—that man. Why you wish to do that? He watch us out of his eye like the lynx."

"Silly, Pierre," she retorted. "Always you suspect. I will not dance with you—no."

But already he had commenced the step, and she was pulled round against her will. To venture an escape was to cause a scene, so she shut her mouth firmly and glared at Pierre in fierce resentment. She saw O'Neill shrug his shoulders and drop into the empty chair beside Hank.

The dance seemed interminable not to say painful, for Pierre was clumsy and trod on her toes a dozen times. Every time they passed O'Neill she smiled at him, chiefly with the object of annoying Pierre, who had so annoyed her.

The orchestra eventually subsided and the dancers were distributing themselves in various directions, when an interruption took place. O'Neill was on his feet, extending his hand to Marie, when a figure pushed through the crowd. It was Rodd. Hank hurried forward.

"What are you doing buttin' in here?" he growled.

"Sit back and hold tight," said Rodd. "I'm here on duty."

"Well, we don't want you."

"Maybe you don't. Vamoose—quick. I got no time to waste."

He elbowed the argumentative Hank out of the way and pushed his way towards O'Neill.

"I want you, bo."

O'Neill raised his eyebrows and Marie gasped.

"Step this way!" said Rodd.

"Is this a joke?" queried O'Neill.

"Do I look like a joker?"

"You look a little disturbed about something."

"I'm not taking any sass. Better quit talking or it may be used as evidence against you."

Pierre's face was a study. It was slowly dawning upon him that Rodd was about to arrest O'Neill for the murder of Dell. He found it most amusing.

"Are you coming," snapped Rodd, "or do I have to use more persuasive methods?"

He tapped the butt of his revolver significantly ; O'Neill sighed.

"I've seen some different brands of policemen," he drawled, "but for sheer downright lunacy you certainly hit the beam. May I ask why you so desire my company ? "

"You may. There was a little affair up the river a few weeks back—somebody shot an ounce of lead into a man named Dell. Does that put you wise ? "

"Very—but I don't see what that has to do with me."

"Pears you ain't strong on guessing. Anyway I've got you and I'm going to take you right along."

Marie stepped forward, her hand moving nervously.

"You're mad," she said. "This man wasn't anywhere near St. Claire at that time."

"I ain't asking for any advice," said Rodd. "He'll have time to prove an alibi before we hang him. I'm through with talking—get ! "

He flourished the revolver under O'Neill's nose and the latter stared at it.

"Well, if you will persist in wasting your time——"

"Cut it out," roared Rodd. "Put up your hands ! "

O'Neill obeyed, and Rodd reached forward, and searched his victim's pockets.

"No gun—eh ? "

"Why should I carry a gun ? "

"Why do hornets sting ? Go straight through that door and don't try beating it, else you might find a cemetery right here."

The excited crowd opened and O'Neill walked forward with Rodd's revolver close to his back Marie, almost paralysed at the totally unexpected

incident, grabbed Rodd by the arm. She opened her mouth to speak when something happened that was destined to alter O'Neill's programme. The door was thrown open and a long, cadaverous man burst in, followed by a dozen desperados armed to the teeth. A gasp of amazement went up, and the crowd backed before the array of threatening weapons. Hands flew to belts, but on this festive occasion everyone had left their lethal weapons at home. The cadaverous man seemed quite aware of this fact and grinned mockingly.

O'Neill stood nearest him surveying him with a curious expression on his face. Rodd, still grasping his revolver, seemed to be petrified. The stranger looked at Rodd and O'Neill and grasped the situation.

"Very pretty," he said in a thin but penetrating voice. "We arrive at the psychological moment. A policeman making an arrest—and in the middle of a ball—what bad taste." He stopped, and his bird-like eyes narrowed as they rested on O'Neill.

"Very strange," he muttered. "I could swear—and yet—" he suddenly reached forward and snatched O'Neill's cap from his head. "By God! it is—the red-haired one—and being arrested, well, that's news." His eyes flashed triumphantly. "Casper, René, whip round quick. Shoot if they resist. We'll deal with the policeman in a minute. Take his gun!"

Two filthy-looking half-breeds sprang forward, while the rest of them made a threatening show of their firearms. Hank, who realised that wholesale robbery was about to take place, tried to make for his cashbox, but was brought to a halt by a command from the cadaverous leader. René—a short-bearded

ruffian, two-thirds Cree, and one third Portuguese—went to Rodd with the object of securing his revolver. Rodd screwed up his face and sighed resignedly. René's hand was within a few inches of the weapon when it went off. Two of the half-breed's fingers dissolved partnership with their fellow digits. Simultaneously with the howl of pain a second shot rang out, and the big hanging lamp in the centre of the room was shattered.

"The door!" yelled the thin voice.

The door slammed, and then a window was shivered to atoms. Shots were fired at random and hideous curses filled the room. O'Neill saw a square of white, and, realising this was the only outlet, made for it. He ran into a small form which caught him by the throat in a tight grip. Someone struck a match, and in the faint illumination he recognised his small assailant as Marie.

"Oh!" she gasped.

"Run—quick!" he hissed, and pushed her towards the window. A moment later he felt a revolver barrel between his ribs, and heard a sinister voice murmur, "Not yet—O'Neill!"

He knew that voice quite well. He had recognised the owner of it immediately he stepped through the door. It was the notorious Captain Flood, once more free to commit outrages. While yet the voice rang in his ears strong arms caught him. He was pushed forward hastily into the snow. Flood gave instructions, and the villainous crowd moved quickly, through the street firing at every man they saw. It amazed O'Neill that no shot was returned.

The whole party entered the wood. Drawn up in

an open space were a dozen big horse-drawn sleighs, and a few men in charge. A man came forward with a coil of rope and quickly bound his legs and arms. Then he was flung into one of the sleighs. Whip-cracks and curses followed, and in a few seconds the whole party was moving swiftly over the snow—northwards.

O'Neill lay on his back, staring up at the stars, wondering what Flood's intentions were regarding himself. Was it merely revenge or had the cunning outlaw some other object in view? He turned over and kicked something metallic. The light of the rising moon brought into view a huge pile of stuff at his feet. He gave a little hiss of astonishment as he beheld an enormous collection of rifles and revolvers. He understood now the easy escape of the gang. While most of the population of St. Claire was dancing Flood had raided the township and taken away, among other things, the firearms. But why?

CHAPTER XII

A PROPOSAL

FOR two hours the sleighs glided over the frozen snow, keeping a north-westerly course.

O'Neill, scantily garbed, suffered acutely from the intense cold. The ropes that held him were too tightly fastened and threatened to stop the circulation of his blood altogether. His hands and feet felt like lead, and only by burying his face in a rug could he manage to keep it safe from the despoiling wind.

He felt a strange numbness creeping into his brain, and realised that this was the harbinger of the sleep that would mean permanent oblivion. With an effort of will he aroused himself from the deadly torpor and yelled at the driver. The latter, muffled in furs, turned and scowled.

"I'm freezing. Do you want to take back a dead man?"

The half-breed snarled, and dragging the thick bearskin from under O'Neill, flung it over his body. For the next half hour the prisoner suffered the awful pain of thawing. In the midst of his agonies the procession halted. He heard the low gabble of voices, and raising his head from beneath the covering be-

held a scene that staggered him. A multitude of tents and wigwams, were spread over the plain—hundreds of them. Here and there were camp fires and black figures outlined against the snow. Some of these were “breeds” but the majority were “bloods” of various tribes. His brain was yet too occupied with his sufferings to indulge in any kind of speculations, but it was patent that this huge cantonment was of recent birth. The meaning of it was wrapped in mystery.

The sleighs were drawn up near the tent and the horses unharnessed and led away. A few minutes later the man named René and another came to him and dragged him from the sleigh. He tottered as his feet touched the snow, and groaned as his half-frozen limbs set up an acute aching.

“Stand up!” snapped René.

O'Neill disregarded the order and sat down.

“If you want to get me anywhere you'll have to carry me—you ugly devil,” he snapped, at which René kicked him in the ribs.

“Thank God—I still have a memory. I fancy you will regret that heroic action.”

René and his friend called another man, and the three of them managed to drag O'Neill across the snow to a big marquee, situated in the centre of an open space, around which straggled the tents and wigwams—forming a rough ellipse. A huge fire was burning outside the marquee, and around it squatted half a dozen Indian braves, wrapped in blankets, and smoking solemnly. The leaping flames played upon their dusky hatchet-faces—as immobile as pieces of wood. O'Neill compressed his lips as he

perceived their shaven heads and the paint on the cheeks. The paint and the single scalping tuft meant war—red war on someone. He received a second shock as he entered the marquee. His eyes fell on the figure of the "brave" nearest him—it was "The Fox that Flies," who, but a short time ago, he had left on Buffalo Lake. The Indian's eyes were turned towards the fire, and it was impossible to say whether he had recognised the prisoner or not. Had he done so, his natural characteristics would have prevented him from exhibiting that fact. A second later O'Neill stood inside the tent.

Two oil-lamps were suspended from the roof, and, sitting Indian fashion on a heap of brushwood, was Flood. He dismissed the three half-breeds with a motion of his hand, and watched O'Neill attempting to maintain his balance.

"You can sit down," he said.

"That's kind of you—perhaps you will remove these ropes now I'm here."

Flood shook his head.

"Oh, no. You are far too slippery, Mister O'Neill. I always had a desire to meet you again—and here we are face to face at last."

"I hope the sight does you good."

"It does. Luck served me well to-night. In addition to a certain amount of money, firearms, ammunition, I have to include Shane O'Neill, late of the N.W.M.P."

O'Neill said nothing. It was easy to see how Flood had arrived at that conclusion, and it was rather fortunate he had dropped into the error.

"So our noble trooper isn't all that people thought him to be—eh?"

"Not quite."

"So. Well I appear to have rendered you a slight service. I am sorry we didn't kill the policeman, but anyway we took you out of his clutches. In other words you have merely changed captors." His beady eyes contracted slightly. "Maybe you will have cause to be glad. So you've finished your five years? How time flies—is it really five years?"

"I believe it is."

"Well, it suits me very well. Now why do you think I have gone to all the trouble of bringing you here, O'Neill?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. It couldn't be revenge—a man of your temperament wouldn't sink so low."

Flood scowled and then laughed.

"I admire a brave man when I meet one. I could have shot you down in St. Claire, had I wished, but revenge takes a second place in my scheme. Oh, no, you are too useful a man to kill, O'Neill. When you were foolish enough to think you had me safely locked up in Regina, I possessed a second lieutenant—a poor creature, who is now unfortunately dead."

"Todson?"

"Yes—your old friend Todson. He was useful to me in a limited fashion, but he was not a man of your own calibre, I confess. Todson was no good where big schemes were concerned—very big schemes."

O'Neill frowned and wondered where the con-

versation was going to lead. Flood lit a cigarette, blew out a cloud of smoke, and gazed into it reflectively.

"You've heard of Louis Riel?" he said.

"Yes. They hanged him in Regina a few years back," said O'Neill tersely.

Flood's face became convulsed. His eyes were filled with insensate rage and his hands moved nervously.

"Yes, they hanged him," he hissed. "He was a bungler—twice he bungled. But the third time——"

"The third time! But he is dead."

Flood's thin lips curled and a curious little hiss escaped him. He stood up and raised his clenched fist above his head. He seemed about to burst into a frenzied utterance, but he suddenly sat down again.

"He is dead," he said. "But his spirit still lives in me. I am his half-brother."

In a flash O'Neill saw it all. Flood was out for rebellion. What could this vast gathering of Indians and "breeds" mean but that? His close connection with the fanatical Louis Riel explained much. The stolen firearms and ammunition were also evidence to the fact. Riel may have been mad, but Flood was sane enough, and a dangerous man as a rebel. Flood seemed to read O'Neill's thoughts.

"You wonder where you come in?" he hissed.

"Yes."

"I will tell you. These Indians want a leader, and you speak the Cree tongue. They are brave in battle, but without a white leader they may fly when

the Government sends troops and field guns. I know. There are two thousand men outside, all armed. For five years I have worked to get money for this, and now the plans are complete. Up country there are five thousand Blackfeet, who will come down when once they see our success, but they hesitate now, because they do not know our strength. We will divide the forces at our command—yours the Northern army, mine the South. Here in the North West we will establish a Red republic. I shall be President and you—whatever else you wish. Once Battleford and Prince Albert are in our hands the rest is easy. To-morrow Prince Albert will fall.”

“To-morrow ! ”

“We march at noon, and by sunset my men will be in possession. Who shall stop us ? Can the garrison resist the weight of two thousand armed men ? ”

O'Neill smothered his amazement and sat in stony silence.

“I offer you this chance,” hissed Flood.

“And if I prefer not to take it ? ”

Flood spread out his hands.

“The Crees have original ideas in the matter of slow death,” he said. “But you will be mad to refuse. There will be little fighting, for the smallest success will bring in a million French. Do you think Quebec has yet forgotten the death of Louis Riel ? Do you think the Government can send many troops up the river in Winter ? *Mon Dieu !* by the Spring they will have accepted the situation and the North West will be a republic.”

"So I have to choose between being a rebel or a corpse?" mused O'Neill.

"Precisely—not a difficult matter my friend."

O'Neill shrugged his shoulders.

"Not a matter that one can decide in a few minutes. What's to prevent me from saving my skin at the expense of my loyalty and then throwing you over?"

Flood laughed.

"Once you are sworn into the republican army you will have committed yourself too far. The English Government have a short way with rebels, as witness Louis Riel."

"I was thinking of him. I shouldn't like to end my promising career at the end of a rope. I suppose you have considered that possibility?"

"I would as leave end mine there as anywhere else. Come, I make you a generous offer. It behoves you to think it over—and quickly. When you decide to join us you will be freed; until then I regret I must keep you in that uncomfortable position."

He stood up and clapped his hands. René appeared from outside.

"Take this—gentleman—where he is safe. Give him food and drink, and loosen his arms that he may eat. Then make him secure again."

René nodded and murmured, "Yes, sah!" He called two other men, and between them they carried the prisoner into an unoccupied tent illuminated by a lantern. A little later René brought tea and some pemmican. He sat with a knife in his hand whilst O'Neill ate. After the meal he replaced the rope and left O'Neill to his thoughts.

The tent lay on the outside of the camp, and was of large dimensions, and evidently used as a store for firearms and ammunition. Boxes of cartridges were piled at the far end along with modern magazine rifles and hundreds of Government revolvers. How and where the cunning Flood had secured this armoury was a mystery, but it went to prove that his mad scheme was of no recent origin, and that preparations extended over a long period. Had he not himself confessed that he had worked — otherwise stolen — for the “cause” for five years?

The immediate problem was not the choice between loyalty and slow death—that had never been in the balance—but how to stop those red battalions outside from leaping like wolves upon the unsuspecting citizens of Battleford and Prince Albert on the morrow. He writhed inside his bonds, but René and his friends appeared to be past-masters in the art of tying knots. All he succeeded in doing was to cause himself additional pain.

An hour passed, and from outside came the sound of guttural voices, wild songs and chanting. He had no doubt that whisky was being freely administered, and he knew the results of spirits upon Indian brains. In twelve hours this half-drunken, blood-thirsty community would take the trail. . . . Even if he succeeded in escaping, what could be done to prevent the catastrophe? The sparsely-garrisoned towns along the river were incapable of putting up much of a resistance, and the majority of the police were 300 miles away. The “regulars” were further still. A call for aid could bring no response for weeks, and by that time,

Flood, with his murderous "army," would have made a shambles of Prince Albert.

Something had to be done—but what? He sat and wracked his brains. Time passed, and the noises from outside dwindled, and then ceased altogether. The red army was sleeping, and probably dreaming of the orgy of rapine that was to take place within the short space of twenty-four hours.

CHAPTER XIII

RODD ON THE WAR-PATH

AFTER the shattering of the lamp, Rodd had run to the window. It was he who had formed that means of exit with the aid of a heavy chair. One idea remained uppermost in his mind now—to get Flood whom he, like O'Neill, had recognised at once. It surprised him not a little to realise that the outlaw had not recognised him, but he ascribed that singular lack of memory to the fact that Flood's mind was entirely occupied with O'Neill.

Men and women came hurtling through the window, floundering in the snow in their haste. A tall, lean figure collided with him, and he grabbed it, believing it to be his hated enemy. The pair struggled furiously in the snow. Rodd's revolver went flying and a pair of knees bored into his stomach. He hit out with his fists and struck something soft—a face.

"Hell!" said an unmistakable voice.

"Hank!" ejaculated Rodd. "Let up—I thought you were Flood."

"Me—Flood! Why you're the damned policeman! Let go. He's after my money."

He struggled to his feet and ran towards the rear of the building just as one of Flood's gang issued from the main door. Rodd, who could not find his revolver, and felt like a fish out of water, made for his tent with the object of getting his rifle. By this time the outraged citizens were surveying the scene of the raid. The post-office was rifled and quantities of furs and firearms removed from the small trading post at the end of the street. Huts and houses had been entered and plundered of various valuables, always including firearms. A few women who had put up a resistance, were unceremoniously knocked on the head. Even the Roman Catholic Mission had been entered and relieved of its sacramental wine. Everywhere was the "mark of the beast."

Rodd, puffing like a grampus, reached his tent and secured his carbine and a belt of ammunition. He filled the magazine of the rifle with a little purr of pleasure, and started again for the township. When he arrived there a curious silence reigned. The streets were deserted, and from far away he thought he heard the sound of bells.

"Too late," he grunted. "The skunk! Why didn't I plug him while I had a chance?"

He knew why. He had a deep-rooted desire to take Flood alive—to ride with him into Prince Albert or Regina, and report "Captain Flood, sir," to the officer in charge; for Rodd, unlike O'Neill, was not without his little vanities. Flood at that moment was the greatest prize in the whole North West Territory.

A blaze of light issued from "The Stars" hotel,

and Rodd made his way thither. Hank had managed to replace the shattered lamp, and was "holding forth" to a crowd of men who, judging by their expressions, were quite as disgruntled as he.

"Eight thousand dollars, that what he's cleaned up here, and the darned cash box as well. And they call this a civilised country. Wal, I bin in California and Colorado where they rear hard seeds, and they warn't no worse than this. Where's the police—I ask you? Lookee, there's that lanky, leather-faced policeman making himself a doggorn nuisance around here when he might be better employed elsewhere. Policemen—why I've dug up better policemen in my potato patch——"

He halted as Rodd strolled into the room.

"What's all this hot-air, bo?" growled Rodd.

"Hot-air—it's gospel truth I'm talking. I'm handing it to you straight."

Rodd's eyes flashed. He wasn't feeling in the mood for recriminations.

"I don't want any back-chat from you, Hank. You've lost your cash box. Wal, we're quits—I've lost my prisoner."

"Prisoner!" snarled Hank. "What are you giving us? You oughter be on point duty in Noo York, directing the traffic. It don't matter two cents to us who killed Jacob Dell. It's a gold mine to a hayseed that red-haired chap didn't. Where is he now, anyway?"

Rodd was asking himself the same question.

"Maybe you're hiding him," he said.

"Maybe he's under that match stick if you take a slant at it," sneered Hank.

Rodd turned away, and the company began to relate various incidents connected with the raid.

"He jus' lak de wolf," said a man. "He coom in de night, and steel our guns so we not able to shoot heem. *Sacre!* But we catch him one day, yes!"

"Must have got wind of this dance o' mine," growled Hank. "Gee—but he's the cutest cuss that ever steered clear of the gallows."

"Wal, he had a near squeak a month back," put in another. "That fellow O'Neill got him at Buffalo Lake, but he made a getaway from Regina."

"Now that's the man to deal with him," said Hank. "Why don't they send him up here. He's worth forty of these wooden policemen."

He looked at Rodd to make sure the remark had reached that worthy's ears, but it had not, for Rodd was busy working out possibilities. If O'Neill was not in St. Claire, the alternative was clear—Flood had captured him. And if Flood had captured him, it meant that O'Neill was in dire peril. Having made and accepted this deduction, Rodd was not the kind of man to waste time. He turned and strode out of the place.

On the threshold he met Pierre, evidently in a state of agitation. The latter cursed savagely as he recognised his old enemy the policeman.

"Say, do you happen to have seen the guy I'm looking for?" queried Rodd.

"Curse you — no. But I lose my sister — Marie."

This was news to Rodd. Did it mean that Flood had carried off Marie as well ?

"Maybe she's run off with that red-haired chap," he hinted. "Gal's go sure crazed over hair of that tint."

Pierre snarled at him, and entered the hotel. Rodd turned and strode down the street. At the end of it the snow was beaten hard with tracks, and it was impossible to pick up the trail of the raiders. But he remembered the sleigh-bells, and wandered in that direction hoping to find the marks of the sleigh-runners. Soon the main trail divided into three tracks. He chose one of these and followed it, until it ended near some fallen timber. He retraced his steps and struck the junction again. His second effort was more successful. It led him through the pines and into an open space. Everywhere were footprints and parallel lines, crossing and recrossing each other, mixed up with the unmistakable marks of horses' feet. A hundred yards further on all these converged into one main route. In the clear light of the moon he could see it winding over the plain—northwards.

He grunted his satisfaction and plunged forward. Through woods and valleys it led, a clear well-beaten passage, that made the "going" easy. The constellations swung across the heavens, and the moon dropped over the western horizon, but still Rodd followed the seemingly endless trail. Towards the dawn he found himself on an elevation. Below him sprawled a thick pinewood, and behind that a sight

that caused him to gasp—Flood's headquarters. Fires still burned outside the tents, throwing a queer ruddy glow over the plain, and the pungent odour of burning wood was wafted to his nostrils.

"Suffering rattlesnakes!" he ejaculated, "what's this?"

No immediate solution came to him, but the sight of this huge camp in the wilderness filled him with suspicion. One fact was clear—to venture into it was madness. O'Neill was not to be set free that way. From somewhere ahead of him came the neigh of a horse—a pleasant sound in the ears of Rodd, who had been born among horses. He made his way forward and eventually came upon them. There were close upon a hundred tethered to trees in a well-protected spot. Nearby was a tent, before which the smouldering embers of a fire sent up a thin spiral of smoke. With his rifle ready for any emergency, he passed the tent, and stood surveying the collection of "mounts." His experienced eye fell upon a young cayuse and he made towards it, uttering little sounds with his lips. The animal pawed the snow, and cast his fierce eyes towards Rodd, but he made no sound, and was quite content to let this stranger unhitch him and mount the high saddle. A slight pull on the reins sent him walking noiselessly forward. Once among the pines Rodd's heels got to work. The cayuse shot off like a thunderbolt, his studded hoofs affording him good foothold.

"Battleford for us, young fellow," cried Rodd. "Let her go—Gee—that's great! We'll make it

In three hours, and then we'll get O'Neill and Flood, and the whole darned outfit. Hell, but you're a spunky little hoss, and no exaggeration."

He passed out of the trees, and went flying over the prairie with showers of snow whirling from the wild horse's heels.

CHAPTER XIV

THE ESCAPE

TO O'Neill the night seemed interminable. He guessed that the dawn would bring Flood on the scene to know the result of his infamous offer. He had not the slightest doubt that death would follow his refusal to accept it. That worried him very little, for his present physical agonies were such as to cause him to welcome any kind of respite—even permanent oblivion.

His mental agonies were infinitely more acute, and for these there was no palliative except in the thwarting of the scheme of bloody plundering which was shortly to be put into action. Yet here he was, aching and helpless—an impotent atom in the clutches of an unscrupulous adventurer.

At times he dropped in a half-sleep, filled with hideous nightmares of red-skinned warriors engaged in merciless slaughter of women and children. He awoke with a shudder, and strove to take a more optimistic view of the matter, but failed. Flood's motive might be political but the Indians' was not. They were out for loot, for fire-water and scalps.

The lamp was burning out, and the tent grew dark.

The intense cold of the early morning smote through the canvas and numbed his feet. It fell upon his face like the edge of a knife, adding to his myriad other agonies.

There was a slight noise from outside, and a second later the tent flap fell away, and a tall well-built Indian glided through it. O'Neill recognised him in the half-light.

" 'The Fox that Flies' awakes before the sun," he said.

" Even so."

" And comes to gaze upon him who was his friend ? "

" The Indian does not forget his friend."

The remark aroused a gleam of hope in O'Neill's breast, but he was reluctant to place much reliance upon it, for the Indian's face was hard and his eyes cold and piercing.

" What does my brother in the camp of the white prophet ? "

" Why has 'The Fox that Flies' left his wigwam by the long lake and taken sides with the enemy of his people ? "

The Indian's eyes flashed. He shook his head thrice.

" The prophet is the friend of the Indian. Has he not brought to my people arms, and food in plenty ? Has he not promised to avenge our wrongs—to give back to us the lands that were stolen in the time of my father's father ? Where now are the hunting grounds of the red man ? Gone to him who came over the blue water. Many moons go, and the red man for ever is driven towards the great frost. Where

are the buffalo that roved the plains as thick as the leaves of the trees in summer? Slaughtered by the white man until none remain. O, Red Hair, there was a tradition among the nations of the Red Man that a great white god should come from beyond the sea to bring peace to our warring tribes. My father's ancestors back in the past, that is now but a dream, met the white man in the great river. Did they not greet him as a friend—a god? Did they not take to him many skins and much corn and welcome him with glad cries? And what did he bring to the dweller of the plains? The fire-water, that made our people as children in his hands. And all the lands that were theirs by the gift of the Manitou were taken from them by cunning. Moon follows moon, and the red man dies from the plague that comes on the ships of the white man. But the Manitou who never sleeps hears the lamentations of his red children, and reads the sorrow in their hearts. So he sent the prophet unto them that their lands might be retrieved, and their people united again—to drive the white invader into the sea whence he came. I have spoken."

The lengthy harangue was evidence of Flood's persuasive oration. He had convinced this fine young chief of a dying people. He had found a way to rekindle the fires within them, to the extent of taking up arms against the Government.

"He speaks with the tongue of a serpent," said O'Neill. "He knows that the soldiers have many guns, and that ere the snow departs the army that he has gathered together will be shattered, and the wigwams of the Crees desolated. Are the Blackfeet

such children as this ? Do they not know the power of the Government ? ”

“ Even now the Blackfeet have declared a truce with my people in the far north. They but await our first victory.”

O'Neill shrugged his shoulders. It was obvious that “ The Fox that Flies ” had implicit faith in the success of the red forces. He knew, too, that the Indian of high blood never lies, and if the Blackfeet had declared a truce it but added to the gravity of the situation.

“ And ‘ The Crow ’—thy father—is he, too, in the camp of the prophet ? ”

“ ‘ The Crow ’ has gone to the happy hunting ground. I, his son, am the sachem of my tribe.”

“ And ‘ Summer Moon ’ ? ”

“ The sister of ‘ The Fox that Flies ’ is faithful to her trust. She abides by the Buffalo Lake and awaits the Red Head to take the child from her that she may return to her people.”

O'Neill laughed grimly.

“ And if I am not in a position to call for my boy ? ”

The Indian who quite appreciated the point, seemed not in the least perturbed.

“ She will return when the next moon is born, and the boy shall live in the wigwam of ‘ The Fox that Flies ’.”

“ I think not,” mused O'Neill. “ I have something quite different in store for him. Listen, if when the new moon is born, I return not to the wigwam by the Buffalo Lake, take the boy to the barracks in Regina. The papers that I left with ‘ Summer Moon ’ will explain. Are my words clear ? ”

The Indian nodded.

"Why does not my white brother join the prophet?" he asked.

"Why does not my red brother sever these bonds?" retorted O'Neill. "Because we are both men, and we act in the way which each considers honourable to his cause."

"Even so," replied the Indian, and without another word, turned on his heels and departed.

O'Neill sighed. He had temporarily forgotten about the boy, and it made him easier in his mind to know that that matter would be satisfactorily settled. He wondered what Rodd would do when he discovered that his fellow policeman was not in St. Claire. He hoped that Rodd wouldn't come rushing in with a brace of revolvers attempting to "shoot up" the neighbourhood. It would prove a disastrous adventure, and one loss to the Corps were better than two.

He was in the midst of some rather discomfiting reflections, when the rustle of canvas caused him to turn his head. It came from almost behind him, near the bottom of the tent. The lamp still gave sufficient illumination to make objects visible, but he saw nothing to account for the noise. Silence reigned for a few seconds, and then the sound was repeated, and under the bottom of the tent appeared a shaggy paw. As he gazed at it in astonishment it turned over, and revealed white, slim fingers. The solution came to his mind immediately, but it seemed impossible in the face of things.

A minute later the "bear" had scrambled under

the canvas, and was removing its head for his special edification.

"Marie!" he hissed.

"S-sh! I am so cold. I wait hours and hours."

"But I don't understand. How did you know I was here? How did you get here?"

She smiled at his bewilderment.

"Last night I see those men take you, and I guess they mean to kill you. I run home and find a revolver, and come back. They are gone then but I hear them and I run so hard. I find them in the wood and hide behind a tree. It was near where I hide the bearskin; so while they bind you I slip into it. One man he see me, but he think I am no lady, oh, no," she chuckled, but grew serious immediately. "There was a beag sleigh filled with furs which they stole, so I creep into it and lie verra quiet—and no one see."

"Great heavens—the risk!"

"Oh, but there was no risk. When the horse he stop and they unharness him, I creep out and hide again. Then I see them take you in the beag tent, and I wait till they bring you here."

"So you have been watching all night."

"By Gar, yes. A little way off, but I could not come, because every time I move the Indians awake and look round. They sleep like the cat—one eye open."

She seemed to be looking for approval in O'Neill's face, but she saw none and her eyes grew sad.

"And now you are not glad."

"I—Marie, I'm thinking of you. You don't understand the awful peril in which you have placed

yourself. In a few minutes the whole camp will be awake. Have you a knife ? ”

She drew a long hunting knife from inside the bearskin.

“ I guess I want him,” she explained.

“ Cut me free—quick ! ”

She slashed at the tough rope and heard him sigh as the bonds fell away.

“ What we do now ? ” she whispered.

“ I don't know—wait ! ”

He crept to the entrance and peered through the flap of the tent. The first sign of the dawn was breaking over the snow. In the distance a few figures were moving, but all was quiet in the immediate vicinity. He turned to Marie, and noticed to his delight a sprinkling of white on her shoulders, quite distinct from the patches of snow gathered in the process of entering the tent.

“ Is it snowing ? ” he queried.

“ Just beginning.”

“ Good. Stand by the entrance and let me know if anyone approaches.”

Unquestioning, she did so. O'Neill chose a rifle from the stack at the end of the tent, and hunted among the ammunition for suitable cartridges. He filled the magazine of the weapon and also his pockets. It was then he made a startling discovery. Packed behind the rifles was an iron keg from which exuded a familiar odour. He touched it with his fingers, and smelt them—kerosine. His ejaculation of joy reached Marie.

“ Why you glad ? ” she queried.

“ I have discovered something very useful. Have you a handkerchief ? ”

She found one and handed it to him. He soaked it in the kerosine, and then taking the keg, poured its contents over the pile of stores. He waved Marie back, and finding a match ignited the handkerchief.

"Crawl under the tent," he whispered. "The way you came. I will follow—quick!"

She pulled the mask over her head, and obeyed him. Instantly he flung the flaming rags towards the saturated stores, and burrowed through the opening by which Marie had vanished. He found her crouching in the piled-up snow outside.

"Run," he murmured. "Straight for the wood yonder. When you are there I will come."

She looked at him and correctly interpreted his motive as he held the rifle ready for action. She ambled across the snow in exact imitation of a bear. O'Neill watched her pass two tents, and held his breath in dreadful suspense, with his finger on the trigger of the rifle. But no interruption came, and two minutes later Marie was obscured by trees.

He rose to his feet, listened intently for a second, and then ran for it. He passed the tents, and was on the fringe of the wood, when the unexpected happened. A dark form stepped out of the woods immediately in front of him, carrying a bundle of sticks. In a second the sticks were dropped and the gleaming blade of a knife appeared as if by magic. O'Neill felt a grip on the barrel of the rifle and saw the steel in the very act of being thrust into his heart.

Crack! The wielder of the knife gave a grunt and crumpled up in the snow. From behind a tree to his left appeared the pale face of Marie, with a revolver in her right hand. Instantly followed a babble of

excited voices. O'Neill turned and saw his recent prison a glowing mass of flame. He caught Marie by the arm and dragged her further into the wood, just as a loud crackle evidenced the explosion of some of Flood's precious cartridges.

"Quick," he implored. "They'll find we are gone and search for us. Thank God the snow is increasing. If it stops we are doomed."

Marie hesitated for a moment. The recent incident seemed to have affected her deeply. She gazed at the weapon in her hand, and uttered a little cry, O'Neill took it from her fingers, and his mouth twitched as he looked into the barrel.

"Where—whose revolver is this ? " he gasped.

"My brudder—Paul."

The situation brought a pang of pain to his heart. She had saved his life with the weapon that he had sought for the past week—a revolver of unusual calibre, one such as fired the shot that killed Jacob Dell. Then it was not Pierre, but Paul who was the culprit! This squared with Dell's description of a short, dark assailant. O'Neill slipped the weapon into his pocket and urged her forward. The powdery snow seemed to drop in a solid mass as they plunged through the woods.

CHAPTER XV

POSSIBILITIES

ON the brow of a hill O'Neill stopped and gazed towards the encampment. The fire was still burning fiercely—a blob of red through the snowy veil. Now and again an explosion rent the air. His position afforded him a view of the whole landscape to the north and west, but the visibility was limited by the falling snow. Turning his eyes towards the fringe of the wood he perceived a confused mass of figures moving along the path which he and Marie had taken. His concerned eyes conveyed the news to her.

“They find our tracks ? ” she queried.

“Yes. We must go faster and trust that the snow will obliterate our footprints before they catch up with us. Come ! ”

He plunged ahead at breakneck speed, dragging her behind him, and keeping to the woods, knowing that they offered greater security than the open plain. For a mile this prodigious pace was maintained, then to Marie's amazement he turned and doubled back on his tracks, pulling her behind him.

“Step in our old marks,” he whispered. “There is a cave in the rock a hundred yards further back.”

They reached the opening in the high bank, and O'Neill stopped and jumped across eight feet of space. He held out his arms to Marie.

"Jump as far as you can," he hissed. "Quick! I hear voices."

Marie held her breath and took a terrific leap forward, she all but cleared the intervening distance, and fell into his arms. He felt her quivering there, and the sensation was not unpleasant. He released her, and filled in the depressions near the entrance.

"If we could move that rock——" suggested Marie, pointing to the huge boulder. O'Neill had already taken that into consideration. He put all his strength to it, and trundled it over. Marie added her weight to the operation, and the stony mass was rolled up against the entrance just as voices came from the near vicinity.

The pair groped their way further into the cave and crouched into the shelter of a projecting space. The intermittent voices grew nearer, and O'Neill recognised the mixed jargon of half-breeds and Cree Indians. He touched Marie on the arm to enjoin complete silence. A little later the voices faded away.

"Are they gone?" whispered Marie.

"Yes, but they will come back when they find the trail leads nowhere."

"They will then guess we are here?"

"I think not. They were intent upon following our foot-prints and doubtless did not notice this recess. When they come back the boulder in the entrance will have gathered an inch of snow. There will be no visible sign that anyone has entered here. Anyway let us hope for the best."

For a quarter of an hour no sound came from outside. In the half-light, O'Neill could see Marie's soft round face in all its perfect outline. It surprised him to find that no sign of fear marked its sweet serenity. She was as calm and self-possessed as if the exploit contained no element of danger.

"You are a brave woman, Marie," he whispered.

"But no. I am terribly afraid. What Pierre say when I return? And Paul was to be home this morning."

The mention of Paul caused O'Neill to frown and bite his lips.

"Has he been away?" he asked.

"Yes. He go fishing las' week. You have not seen Paul?"

He shook his head.

"He is not lak' Pierre," she confided. "Paul is jus' dee-lightful. Everyone love Paul. He dance and sing and play the violin. Always his heart is light."

O'Neill maintained a stolid silence. Marie looked at him curiously and smiled.

"Sometime I think you are lak' Pierre," she whispered. "And sometime lak' Paul—the other day you laugh and look—happy, but now you do not laugh."

"It is no time for laughing, Marie."

"Why not? If they find us, no matter, we laugh. Perhaps they keel us, what then? Oh, I fear not death. I see him many times up heer."

O'Neill turned his head away. It was obvious to him that she had not considered eventualities far worse than death, not from the Indians, but from such

riff-raff as René who boasted all the vices of both red men and white. But in this he misjudged the spirit of Marie.

"I know what you think," she whispered. "That is why I bring this." She drew the knife from her bosom, and swiftly put it back again. It made him feel ashamed.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "For a moment I thought you did not understand the danger you ran. But why did you come—why?"

Had he been less ignorant of the ways of women, less embittered by his experience with an unworthy one, he might have read the answer in her eyes.

"I think they mean harm to you—so I came."

"They did, Marie. Flood is an old enemy. But you should not have come. I am not worth so deadly a risk."

She laughed lightly.

"If it had been me who was captured would you not have come?"

"That's different."

"*Mais non*—jus' the same. In the North we are all comrades, or enemies. You must have me for a comrade or an enemy."

"I would rather be burned and tortured to death than make you my enemy, Marie. Yet one day you may regard me as that."

She stared at him in amazement. It was the first time she had ever seen him in the throes of any emotion.

"Why you say that?"

"Life is a strange thing, Marie, full of complications and cross-channels. If the day should ever come

when you find I am not all I pretend to be—perhaps you will make allowances.”

Her face was full of enquiry. Her yearning, beautiful eyes met his unflinchingly. In them was faith, implicit trust, and it hurt worse than physical wounds. He felt her warm hand descend on his, and the contact thrilled him strangely.

“Sometimes I t’ink you are not happy, *mon ami*, that you miss all that is beautiful, and then I am verra sad because—because——”

What she might have added remained unvoiced for a stick cracked outside and voices were heard. Marie’s hand tightened on O’Neill’s and lay there trembling like a leaf. Nor was it due to the near proximity of their foes. A tense silence reigned for a minute and then the voices were heard in the distance.

“They’ve gone,” whispered O’Neill. “But we must wait a little longer.”

“Yes,” she agreed promptly.

Conversation languished after that: To both of them there was an invisible barrier between the soul’s desire and its fulfilment. O’Neill stared fixedly at the shaft of light that smote through the crevice in the outer wall, and Marie sighed and wondered if the heart of him was nearly as frozen as it appeared to be. His strange utterance was food for considerable reflection on her part. Did it mean that somewhere there was a woman who held his affection—of whom he thought in those moments of abstraction which were so frequent with him? Yet he had expressed contempt for women in general! Her quiet eyes regarded him steadily. He turned and became aware of the fact.

"You look at me as though I were a wild animal," he said.

"I never can understand you—why you say just now we may not be friends one day?"

"Forget it, for the present," he replied abruptly, "when that day comes it will be time to remember." Her eyes burst into flame.

"Now you are Pierre," she retorted. "You sink I can do this or that or anything you lak' to ask. By Gar, I wish I leave you to the Indians."

"So do I," he muttered.

Her wrath vanished as quickly as it came. Something wet welled up in her eyes, and he heard a queer little sniff.

"What a brute I am," he said penitently, "and you have risked so much. Marie, I seem fated to hurt people I love most. You've heard of Jonah?"

"Yes—he do the washing in St. Claire."

"No, no. I meant the Bible Jonah."

"Yes, I remember—a fish swallow him. But that is one leetle—what you call him—fable?"

"Perhaps. But I feel just as if a whale had swallowed me, and it's all cold and dark inside——"

"Then I keel heem and set you free."

"Nothing can ever set me free, Marie. There's a little devil has a grudge against me. Five years ago I fought him and gained a temporary victory. It was the eve of the New Year, when resolutions are made. Out on the trail, not many miles from here, I made mine. I thought I heard the bells of my old native village ringing as they used to ring, and it fixed that resolution with the seal of certainty. I breathed a new atmosphere. I saw myself as I used

to be before the little devil came and lived with me. Well I thought I had killed him, buried him deep under the snow. The whole world seemed different—cleaner, dearer. But it didn't last long. The little devil only slept. He came out of the snow ere the New Year was born and branded me with his hot iron. That night I brought suffering to an innocent creature. For five years my little devil deserted me, and I breathed anew. But I found him up here in the Saskatchewan."

"Up here!" she ejaculated.

"Aye—working new mischief. Again I am destined to hurt someone deeply—and there's no way out, except one that cannot be taken."

What could she understand of this queer harangue? He seemed to lead her to the brink of the abyss only to drop a veil before her eyes that she might not see what lay at the bottom.

"I wish I understand you—that I might help," she said softly. "Women were made to help men I sink."

"My dear delightful girl, you are the last thing that can help me," he said. "With all your courage, your ingenuousness, your heart of gold, you are powerless to do anything—come, it is safe to leave now."

"I leave the bearskin here," she said. "I travel faster wit'out it."

He nodded approval and watched her slip out of the cumbrous covering.

"Are you warm enough?" he queried.

"Yes, I have t'ree vests and two pairs of stockings."

They left their hiding-place, and made through the woods in the direction of St. Claire. Half an

hour later they struck the main trail. O'Neill stopped.

"I fear you must travel alone from here, Marie," he said.

She gazed at him in astonishment.

"I have to go back," he explained.

"Back! But——"

"Yes. You do not understand the peril that threatens us. You saw that camp. It contains two thousand Indians and breeds. At noon they will march on Battleford and Prince Albert. If they reach their destinations, God help the citizens."

Marie's face paled as she grasped the situation.

"They are rebels?"

"Yes. We have been fortunate enough to sap half their strength—the ammunition and rifles in that tent. But that is not enough to stop them. Flood means business, and they have faith in victory."

"But what can you do?" she asked. "You will only go back to your death. No, no. You cannot——"

"Marie—there is one solution to the problem. Without Flood to lead them they are like so many frightened children. I am going back for Flood."

"To—to keel heem?"

"If necessary."

"But you cannot get to him. If you keel him they will keel you—yes."

"Isn't that better than the other alternative? Would you put my life in the scale against hundreds of women and children?"

She choked, and was about to plead with him, but he put out his hand abruptly and grasped hers.

"*Au revoir!* Go straight to St. Claire and tell the policeman, Rodd, what is happening down here. He may be able to muster a force in case——"

She nodded and clung for a moment to his hand. Then she turned and went swiftly down the trail.

CHAPTER XVI

IN THE NICK OF TIME

O'NEILL, filled with his grim resolution, made towards the camp. Much as he would have liked to capture Flood alive, that course seemed impossible. To have entered the camp after having wrought such destruction upon Flood's precious armoury, would seal his own doom as surely as the sun shone in the heavens. It occurred to him that he might seek an interview with the leader of the rebels in order to apprise him of his decision in regard to the proposal made him, but it was almost certain he would not enter Flood's presence with his limbs free. That course was far too risky.

- He resolved to accept the alternative and looked about him for a means to bring it to fruition. The snow had now ceased and through the scudding inky clouds the sun shone intermittently, affording him an uninterrupted view of the encampment from the clearing in the pinewoods in which he now stood.

The hill sloped down at a regular gradient for a mile or so, beyond which were the tents and contraptions of the rebel "army." Flood's marquee was just visible in the centre of the camp. Away to

the left was a smouldering pile of rubbish, the site of his recent prison.

He unslung the rifle and commenced to creep forward cautiously, making for a clump of tall pines on the north side of the camp. Nothing happened to arrest his progress, and twenty minutes later he gained his objective. The largest of the pines reared up—a perfectly perpendicular growth of a hundred and fifty feet with its lower portion shorn of branches by the axe of some woodman long dead. These amputations left a few inches of growth projecting from the main trunk and afforded excellent aid for climbing.

He slung the rifle over his shoulder and commenced to scale the dizzy height. The last thirty feet rose well above the neighbouring trees, and from his forked seat he looked down into the camp. The marquee was some five hundred yards away with its entrance facing him. The camp was in a state of great activity. Horses were being harnessed to sleighs, and stores of various kinds were being packed. Indians hung about in groups, gesticulating incessantly, their heads adorned with black and white feathers, and their belts bristling with all kinds of weapons. Some of them carried rifles, but it pleased him to notice that a large number boasted no firearms whatever—an omission due to the smoking pile on the fringe of the camp.

His intention was to wait until Flood emerged from the tent and to drop him with a bullet. But the task was not easy for, although Flood's figure would be easily recognisable, the distance was great. At the most he would be allowed two shots, and then his

position would be untenable. He wished he possessed the uncanny skill of Rodd, who would have planted bullets in any stipulated part of Flood's anatomy with that certainty which Rodd always exhibited in the matter of shooting.

For half an hour O'Neill waited. Men entered and emerged from the marquee, but Flood did not appear. Parties of Indians began to "strike" the smaller tents and the fully-laden sleighs were being drawn up in lines. His limbs became cramped, and he changed his position from time to time, never removing his eyes from the square opening in the marquee.

At length Flood appeared. He looked an imposing figure in his long blue coat and woollen tuque as he walked from the marquee and imperatively issued instructions to a crowd of men near him. O'Neill put the rifle to his shoulder and took careful aim.

Crack! The explosion brought down a shower of snowdust which momentarily obscured his vision. He peered through it and saw Flood still standing there, but in a different attitude—one of amazement—the men near him gazing fixedly at a small round hole in the tent, invisible to O'Neill. With a little hiss he raised the rifle and fired again. Flood's woollen tuque took a leap from his head. The men broke and ran. O'Neill cursed savagely, and was about to fire again, when there was an explosion below, and a bullet whistled by his head. He looked down, and through the mass of branches caught a glimpse of several figures, also a rifle barrel pointed steadily at him.

"Move an inch and I keel you," yelled a voice.

The pointing weapon and the grim face behind it—

René's—was sufficient to force discretion. Three feet behind O'Neill was the main trunk. To reach it and shelter behind it was impossible. He craned his neck forward and beheld eight men in all.

"Drop the rifle or I shoot," cried René.

O'Neill dropped it and heard it clatter among the branches.

"Now come down."

"All right," he replied. "You are just the man I wanted to see, René."

He commenced to descend, dropping from branch to branch, until he was on the lowest, thirty feet above René's head. He made a pretence of crawling along it to reach the trunk, but when immediately above the half-breed dropped like a thunderbolt. The rifle went off, and the flame scorched him. A tenth of a second later his feet met René's face. He heard a sickening "squelch" as all the weight of his falling body was received by the unfortunate man's countenance. One swift look at the prone figure convinced him that René would perpetrate no more outrages. He hit out at the man nearest him and nearly broke his knuckle on a hard jaw-bone. The recipient measured his length in the snow, his knife falling from his senseless fingers. O'Neill swooped down and secured the weapon. The remaining half-dozen went for him like wild cats. Curses and groans and imprecations followed. One of them, with a face like a rat, flung back his arms, and sent his knife spearwise through the air. O'Neill swerved and the weapon found a billet other than that intended. It fixed in the throat of a fat little ruffian, who was on the verge of putting "paid" to the account of Trooper Shane

O'Neill. That left but five to deal with, but they were five desperate men, skilled in the use of the knife and wiry as leopards. Two of them pounded on O'Neill from behind, locked his arms and waited for their comrades to administer the *coup de grace*.

"Hold!"

The man immediately in front of O'Neill let the knife fall to his side as he beheld the figure of Flood, accompanied by a Cree.

"The chief!" he gasped.

Flood came forward and smiled as he stared into O'Neill's eyes.

"It was lucky I came," he lisped, "they might have killed you in that vulgar fashion. I'm glad I have forestalled such a calamity."

He touched the dead René with his foot, and shrugged his shoulders as he realised his valuable henchman was dead.

"You are a very violent man, Mr. O'Neill. I admire violent men. What a lot of damage one man can do in a few short hours. Well, I think we have time to deal with you before we march."

O'Neill smiled easily.

"You will never march, Flood."

"Eh?"

"That collection of rabble will never do anything but help to bring forth the spring flowers."

Flood seemed not in the least upset by this scathing observation. He purred softly and rubbed his hands.

"Fertilising woodland flowers is by no means a degrading occupation. Maybe you too, Mr. O'Neill, will participate in that." He turned to the men who

held the prisoner's arms. "Take him to the centre of the camp—I will follow."

O'Neill was led away, bound, and flung into the snow to await Flood's decision concerning his death. He had not long to wait. Flood entered the clearing and rapped out some instructions. A thick stake was requisitioned and sunk into the earth. To this O'Neill was bound with stout strips of buffalo hide. Two Crees began to distribute brushwood in a circle of small radius with the pole as its centre. Flood watched the operation with interest. He nodded his head as he scrutinised O'Neill's face in all its stony expressionlessness. It afforded a vast amount of curiosity. How would such a man act under the agony of the most diabolical torture? Could he maintain that air of indifference? Could human will-power survive in the face of such pain?

O'Neill, despite his forward glance, saw all that was taking place. He realised that the intention was not to burn him, but to roast him, slowly and deliberately, from the feet upwards. The Indian who superintended the operations, displayed the most scrupulous care in the arrangement of the brushwood. The victim must not suffocate—that would spoil everything. Nor must the fire be too fierce, or the victim would not survive five minutes. The whole business was akin to a scientific experiment worked out to seven places of decimals.

By the time everything was complete, practically the whole camp had gathered round the stake, forming a huge circle. Flood made a sign and a half-breed lighted a torch. It spluttered for a moment and then broke into fierce flame. The man walked

towards the brushwood with the object of thrusting the torch well under the piled branches. He had almost reached the edge when his knees suddenly gave way and he dropped on his face and lay still.

A look of amazement came over the sea of dusky faces. There was nothing to account for this strange incident. It was just as though the man had trodden on a ten-thousand-volt electric cable, except that his body appeared to be unscathed. Flood, who evidently attributed the calamity to some kind of seizure, turned to another man and ordered him to carry out the interrupted task. The man walked forward, and, reaching his dead predecessor, stooped to pick up the flaming torch. His fingers had almost clasped upon it, when he, too, measured his length in the snow and lay still.

O'Neill was the only man present who knew the secret of the swift death. The two bodies were but six yards from him, and on the left side of the back of the second he saw a round, black-rimmed hole. He knew the meaning of it. Somewhere in the pines over five hundred yards away, was Rodd with his terrible unerring rifle. No one but Rodd could have performed such miracles of marksmanship. The two men had received the messengers of death clean through the heart. In the distance the pine trees looked innocent enough, and the report of the rifle was smothered by the denseness of the timber. Moreover the wind was favourable to the occasion. O'Neill saw a gleam of hope. He wondered how long Flood would remain ignorant of the existence of the hidden sniper.

The death of the second man caused a low murmur

of alarm to issue from the throats of the spectators. They craned their necks forward, curious to know what magic was at work here. Flood, however, was quickly alive to the solution, but uncertain how to act. He turned to the red-skinned chief beside him and whispered something. The latter nodded and unslung the rifle from his shoulder. He made a few gestures and half a dozen braves stood up and ran to him. He rapped out instructions, and the party commenced to make for the pines where Rodd presumably lay hid.

They had not gone ten yards when there came an interruption that brought them to a halt. There was a low boom, a kind of screech through the air, and a deafening explosion. A sleigh standing outside the ring of spectators was suddenly enwrapped in flame and smoke, and disappeared in fragments. There was an awed silence for a second, and then the whole cordon broke with yells of rage and fear. A second boom, and another nerve-racking explosion. The shell burst, flinging up a cloud of snow. A crowd of men in the vicinity wheeled and retreated.

O'Neill, no less amazed than Flood, was suddenly treated to a sight as welcome as it was wonderful. From out of the trees, half a mile away, came columns of mounted police. They crossed an open space, and disappeared into the woods again, as though making for the timbered point nearest the camp. He gasped as they continued to come—hundreds of them! He blinked, wondering if this were some trick of the vision, but a glance at the face of Flood, and at the startled Indians, convinced him it was true.

Still the mounted men continued to cross the snow.

It looked as though every member of the N.W.M.P. had been miraculously transported to the spot. Flood's face was the picture of abject disappointment and baffled hope. He tried to rally his panic-stricken forces, but failed. Then his eyes turned to O'Neill, and all his hate was levelled at the helpless man. He ran towards the latter, a revolver in his hand.

"Curse you!" he hissed. "This must be your doing, O'Neill. But you are not going to live and triumph over me."

"I said you would never march, Flood."

"But *you* are going to march now," he retorted, "right into hell."

He levelled the revolver and O'Neill saw the deadly intent in his inflamed eyes. He saw the finger compress on the trigger, and then—*Flood dropped dead*. O'Neill looked towards the pines but saw no sign of Rodd. But a moment later a horse and rider emerged from the woods with one hand raised aloft to indicate he came with a message. He halted on the fringe of the camp and a deputation went to meet him. O'Neill saw him in conversation with "The Fox that Flies" and several other chiefs. Much gesticulation followed and the chiefs returned. Ten minutes elapsed during which O'Neill wrenched at his bonds, without avail. Indians and half-breeds hung about in small cliques, apparently discussing the unexpected change in the situation. At length a decision was arrived at. "The Fox that Flies" came to O'Neill and cut him free.

"The white man wins," he said. "The prophet is dead, and the woods are full of police. The Manitou has deserted his red children."

O'Neill said nothing, but walked towards the mounted figure outside the camp. It was Captain Wren looking extremely contented with himself.

"We were in the nick of time, O'Neill."

"Yes, sir. I never expected this."

"I don't suppose you did—jump aboard. I'll take you back to the woods."

O'Neill mounted the black broncho and they cantered across the snow. Inside the woods he dismounted and met Rodd.

"Gee! I reckon it was a near thing with you, boss," he ejaculated, wringing O'Neill's hand. "Now wasn't it cute o' me to get the boys here in time."

"Rodd, I don't understand it. How the deuce——"

"S-sh! They did it fine. Did you see that little stage show yonder? Not bad for twenty-four——"

"Twenty-four!"

"How many did you think there was? I once stage-managed a theatre. Why we used to do great things with a dozen—marching 'em across the stage and round the wings and back again."

O'Neill gasped and then laughed amusedly.

"I knew you had a stroke of genius, Rodd."

"Yep. But the three-pounder was the Captain's idea. We brought it up in a sleigh from Battleford. Why we only had them two shells."

"So you went to Battleford?"

"You bet. I beat up here last night and reckoned I'd want help. Lucky for us this squadron had just returned there after settling that little fracas with the Blackfeet. Say—did I get Flood?"

"You did."

Rodd's face fell.

"I guess it had to be, but it's a damn shame to let him die peaceful—like. Why, that's a gentleman's death!"

He clicked his heels and saluted as Wren came forward.

"They're beginning to disperse," he said. "I gave them an hour's grace. They seem to have no heart for fighting now their leader is gone. They have an idea we are about five hundred strong. Rodd deserves promotion for that idea." His eyes fell on O'Neill's "mufti." "So you are up here incog.?"

"Yes, sir."

"Anything to report in that murder affair?"

"Nothing—except that I shall arrest my man tomorrow," replied O'Neill, grimly.

CHAPTER XVII

THE TIGHTENING OF THE NET

O'NEILL and Rodd made their way back to St. Claire an hour later. The stratagem had succeeded and Flood's rebel army was rapidly dissolving under the impression that the woods were invested by a considerable army against whom they stood no chance of victory. Wren and his men remained to see the last of what had constituted a very grave peril. He had permitted them to take away the body of Flood that they might give him Indian "burial"—high up on a bier slung between the branches of a tree.

"So that's the end of Flood," remarked Rodd.

O'Neill nodded, without a word. He did not feel like conversing. Marie was occupying his mind. From the few things she had said about Paul, he guessed that she loved her younger brother with all the depth of her heart. To arrest him would mean the infliction of a tremendous blow upon Marie. Yet duty was duty and there was no way out.

"See here, O'Neill," said Rodd. "I don't get the hang of this thing. What was going to be the programme after I arrested you?"

"You were then going to shoot me."

"Eh ? "

"Just that, Rodd."

"But why ? "

"I wanted to get inside Lestrangle's house. If I could have got there as a fugitive from the hated policeman, with a wound, they would have given me shelter."

"I get you. But what good would that have been ? "

"I might have discovered the revolver from which the shot that killed Dell was fired."

"That's a good notion," said Rodd. "I'll get busy and shoot you right now."

"There's no need. I've got the weapon."

Rodd looked at him in astonishment.

"How could you get it ? Did Flood collar it ? "

"No. Marie Lestrangle brought it with her last night."

Rodd, ignorant of Marie's visit and of the incidents that followed, opened his eyes wide.

"What are you giving me ? " he asked.

"She followed Flood last night and helped me to escape. We got away this morning, but I came back. I had to stop that bloodthirsty crew from getting to Prince Albert, and the only way was to kill Flood."

"And he got you again ? "

"Yes. But before I left Marie, I took possession of the revolver—here it is."

He handed Rodd the weapon. The latter examined it, and taking out one of the cartridges, extracted the bullet with his teeth.

"Gee—it's the very gun ! " he ejaculated, "and

I guess there ain't another one like it for a hundred miles."

He looked at O'Neill keenly.

"You don't seem much excited anyway."

"I'm not. Rodd, that girl risked everything last night to save me and to-morrow we are going to arrest her brother. That revolver belongs to Paul Lestrangle."

"I see," mused Rodd. "But why should he want to kill Jacob Dell?"

"He had a sister named Celeste. Does that convey anything to you?"

Rodd's rather slow brain got to work. He saw it all now.

"Gosh! So you win again, O'Neill. I don't mind telling you I reckoned you'd fail this trip."

"I half wish I had," replied O'Neill bitterly.

"Oh, shucks! We ain't here to sentimentalise; if brother Paul put that guy through he's ours for keeps."

O'Neill glared at him.

"If Celeste had been your sister, Rodd, what would you have done? That scoundrel had a wife and children."

"I ain't trying to excuse him," muttered Rodd. "But if the police go hunting up everyone's private history I reckon most murders would be justified in one way or another."

"Shut up!" snapped O'Neill. "Your mania for arresting people shall be satisfied. Paul is returning to St. Claire to-day. To-morrow morning you can arrest him."

Rodd pursed his lips. He reckoned he knew

where O'Neill stood, and his air of indifference had been assumed with a view to corroborating a suspicion in his brain. Was O'Neill in love with Marie? It looked like it. He had never had a shadow of doubt that O'Neill would do his duty however much it clashed with his private interests, and here was proof of it.

"I suppose we gotta do this?" he queried.

O'Neill looked at him.

"What the devil are you talking about? What did we come up here for?"

"Yep—that's jest it. What did we come here for? I ain't averse to putting men's necks in the hangman's noose, but I learnt something about that gal Celeste that sure takes away most of my interest."

Rodd's sudden change-about puzzled O'Neill.

"What did you learn?" he asked.

"That little gal Celeste she didn't die of no broken heart—not much. She put herself away with a knife when that skunk deserted her. And what for? Because——" his voice was lowered to a tense whisper, "because she wanted to prevent someone from being born."

O'Neill's lips closed tightly and his eyes flashed fiercely.

"I guessed that," he said. "But how did you find out?"

"Another letter. I'll show you when we get back. It was behind the stove—where Dell put all her letters. I reckon it was the last one she wrote. She wanted him to let the priest marry them while he was in St. Claire. Now I do surmise that killing a creature like that ain't a crime."

"That's not for us to decide, Rodd."

"Maybe it ain't—but damn it we're human, ain't we?"

"Not when we are the victims of duty. Paul will have a fair trial. It's for him to appeal to the sympathy of his judge."

"Rats! Do you think he will drag up all this. If he's any kind of a man he'll take his gruel and say nothin'."

O'Neill sighed. The hut came into view, reminding him that they must separate again. He took the revolver from Rodd and pocketed it.

"We part here, Rodd. Go to Lestrangle's house and get Paul in the morning."

"Then you're goin' through with it?"

"I am."

"Wal, you know best. But it's darned rough on Paul. I gotta kind o' admiration for him. All right, I'll get him."

A little later O'Neill arrived at his camp. To his surprise the smoke of a fire met his eyes as he stepped out of the woods. He crossed to the tent and, rounding it, came upon Marie sitting in a state of reflection. She sprang to her feet with a cry of joy as she saw him and gripped his hands excitedly.

"So you come back. *Mon Dieu*, I dream you were captured again——"

"I was."

She opened her eyes in astonishment.

"And you escape?"

"Yes. The rebellion is all over and that scoundrel Flood is dead."

"The policeman was not there when I return," she

said. "I tell my brudder Pierre about the Indians, but he only say I am silly. Oh, and he grow furious with me for what I do las' night. He say I am disgraced and that he will keel you when he see you. I—I am so afraid."

O'Neill smiled whimsically.

"I appear to be constantly getting you into trouble, Marie. But you can tell your brother that I shall be gone to-morrow, so there will be no need to kill me."

She stared at him in blank amazement.

"To-morrow !"

"Yes."

"You wish to escape the policeman ?"

"No. I do not fear him now. If he tries to arrest me again I have the means to prove I was hundreds of miles from here when Dell was murdered."

"Then why you go—is it not beautiful here ?"

"Yes—but my work is done."

"Work !—Oh, but I do not understand. Shall I see you no more ?"

"I—I think not Marie."

She turned her head away, and for a full minute neither of them spoke. When she looked at him again her face was wreathed in a smile, as she strove bravely to hide her heartache from him.

"But perhaps one day you will come back ?"

"Perhaps, one day, when you have forgiven me."

"Forgiven you !"

He wished he could have told her there and then, but as yet the coup was not complete. A false step might ruin everything. Paul was not yet in custody, and until that came to pass he considered it wise to continue the masquerade.

"Have you not much to forgive?" he said. "Ever since I have been here I have caused friction between your brothers and you——"

"No, no—only Pierre, and he does not understand. Paul is different. To-day he came back, and he tell Pierre to mind his own business. But Pierre he is so afraid——"

"Afraid!"

"Of the policeman."

"Why should he be afraid of the policeman?"

She was silent for a moment and O'Neill wished he had not asked the question.

"He is afraid because of someone he love," whispered Marie. "I cannot tell you more, but one day perhaps I tell you—if you come back," she added with a queer little choke.

"I do not wish to know more, Marie. I only know and wish to remember one thing—that you are the bravest and sweetest little girl in the North."

Her eyes fell under his steady glance and her face became crimson.

"It is not true," she whispered, "but still I wish you to think that."

"It is true. How many would have acted as you did last night—braving death and worse for a—stranger."

"But you are not a stranger," she argued. "Did we not say we were friends? Shall we not always be friends?"

His silence puzzled her. It brought to her mind the gist of other conversations with him. He had spoken of hurting someone—her. How could he hurt her, except in one place—her heart. The solu-

tion of it all must be the one least acceptable to her. There was some woman somewhere to whom he was going back on the morrow. It seemed to her like a repetition of her sister's tragic affair. Yet it was different—for here the man was exculpated from blame. He had not made love to her. For that very reason she felt assured that her suspicions were well-grounded. She envied this other woman—almost hated her, until she remembered and choked down the unworthy emotion.

"Then we may not even remain friends—after to-morrow," she murmured.

"I shall be your friend, Marie—always," he said quietly.

"And I shall be yours," she retorted hotly, "until you prove you are unworthy. *Mon Dieu!* you could not do that."

A figure came out of the woods and moved towards them. Marie gave a little cry as she recognised it.

"Paul!" she cried.

The youth approached them—the newly-detached skin of a silver fox over his shoulder.

"I trap heem," he said. "Oh, so easily."

"This is Mister Shane," explained Marie.

Paul nodded and smiled pleasantly.

"I geev you good warning, m'sieur. Tak' care of my brudder, Pierre. He is verra mad sometime. He love Marie and t'ink she pay you too much attention—yes."

Marie blushed, and Paul burst into laughter, but he quickly subsided as he saw O'Neill's grim countenance.

"Pardon, m'sieur, but it is too funny. My brudder

he do not understan' friendship—no. But in hees heart he is good and true. One day maybe, he get married, then he smile instead of frown."

"I was telling Marie that Pierre need not dislike me after to-morrow. I am hitting the trail—eastward."

"I am verra sorry, m'sieur," said Paul politely. "But maybe you lak' the beeg cities and the noise. For me always my beloved woods. For ever I shall stay heer by the river. Maybe I get married one day and have children. Then I tell them everyt'ing about the beautiful nature, and teach them to trap the bear, and catch the cunning badger, and fish in the stream, and how to build the canoe. Ah, but life is jus' wonderful!"

And this was Paul, destined to be placed in custody within the next twenty-four hours, with the threat of the gallows over his sunny head.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE ARREST OF PAUL

"**E**VERYTHING ready ? " queried O'Neill. Rodd examined his revolver, pulled on his mittens, and grunted. It was early morning, and O'Neill had taken the opportunity to visit the shack prior to the projected arrest of Paul.

" You may have trouble, Rodd," he warned.

" I hope so."

" And I don't. Only fools look for trouble when it can be avoided."

" Only blamed fools 'ud think of interfering with the N.W.M.P.," retorted Rodd. " What do I do when I get him ? "

" Bring him up here and secure corroborative evidence."

" You mean the wound ? "

" Yes. That will prove the thing up to the hilt."

" Then I guess we hit the trail for Regina ? "

" Yes. I'll start packing up my gear. Leave my uniform handy."

" It's ready. Gosh, they'll be sick with you when you put it on. Better leave the change until afterwards—and just vanish."

"I'm going to leave this place as a policeman," grunted O'Neill, "or be buried in it."

"Only fools go looking for trouble," said Rodd sweetly.

"I'm not looking for trouble. But I'm tired of this masquerading—yet it had to be done or we should have failed."

"Sure."

"Well, get along—and keep your eye on Pierre."

"He don't worry me none. So long! See you presently."

He moved out of the door and O'Neill watched him go towards the township. What a bitter awakening for Paul, who but last night was talking of the future! He frowned as he thought of the boy hanging, or spending the rest of his life within prison walls. The thought of the parting with Marie caused him a certain amount of mental agony. What would she think of him, who had apparently played with her affections with this end in view? He began to wish he had never seen her, or that he had entered the camp under his true colours. It would have meant failure perhaps, but now he was testing the bitterness of success. Yet, he reflected, it all lay within the wide span of duty, and it was not for him to venture opinions as to the rights or wrongs of the case. Never before had he questioned his duty—but never before had his duty clashed with Love, as it did now. Had the circumstances been different, he might have borne it easier, but all his sympathy was with Paul, who had acted as any decent honourable brother would have acted. It surprised him that Paul should have done this and not Pierre,

whose nature would naturally lead him to such a revenge.

In the meantime Rodd was making for Lestrangle's house. Contemptuous as he had appeared to be at O'Neill's warning, he was quite aware that trouble was almost inevitable. The only argument against it was the almost total lack of firearms, due to Flood's raid on the township.

The "street" was practically deserted when he reached it, for it was scarcely light, and St. Claire did not practise the virtue of early rising. He stood before the door of the house he sought, and, after a brief hesitation, lifted the latch, and walked in. Marie who was busy at the breakfast table, turned and regarded him.

"What you want?" she asked.

"Is your brother here?" queried Rodd quietly.

"I call him. Pierre——"

"I don't want Pierre. It's Paul I want."

Her eyes narrowed and alarm spread over her face. Pierre, half dressed, came into the room. He started violently as he beheld the intruder.

"The policeman," he hissed. "Why you come in heer this time o' day?"

"I'm looking for someone."

"He—he wants Paul," stammered Marie.

"Paul!" snapped Pierre, gazing intently at Rodd.

"Why you want Paul?"

"That's my business."

Pierre evidently thought it was his. He crept round the table, but was brought to a halt by Rodd's ready revolver.

"Keep jest there. We don't want to start the day

with frolics, oh, no. Better bring Paul here right now." He looked at Marie. "You bring him, mam'selle, and tell him I'm ready to deal with any tricks."

Pierre snarled, and Marie's throat moved.

"I—I cannot fetch him," she replied.

"Why not?"

"Because he is not here."

"Then perhaps you'll put me wise where he is."

"We tell you noding," said Pierre with a baleful glance. "You are one beeg fool and——"

To Rodd's surprise Marie silenced her savage brother with a gesture.

"You are going to arrest Paul?" she asked gently.

"You got it."

"Why you wish to arrest him?"

"For the murder of Jacob Dell."

Her face went deathly pale. She shook her head slowly.

"You mak' one beeg mistake. Paul, he did not do that."

"That's for the court to find out. I got enough evidence to make it awkward for him. You say he ain't here?"

"No."

"See here, mam'selle, I don't want to start rushing all over the shack. You give me the straight tip he's not in this house, and I'll mush and git him elsewhere."

Marie crossed herself devoutly and murmured, "he is not here."

"Good enough!" quoth Rodd. He looked at Pierre. "You're busting to have a hit at me, but

watch your step, corse I'm a bit quick with this pop-gun."

He tossed the weapon in the air, caught it by the handle, and went out. Pierre swore violently in French and ran to a drawer from which he extracted a knife.

"Pierre ! " ejaculated Marie.

"You heer what he say ? "

"Yes, but Paul can prove his innocence. He have no evidence. That is a lie. If you keel him anoder policeman come, and then what good have we done. No, put that away."

She took it from his fingers, strangely enough without protest on his part. To her amazement he took her by the shoulders, and his savage expression vanished as he looked into her eyes.

"*Ma chere*, you are so brave it mak' me ashamed. But I fear, always I fear——"

"There is no need to fear or to suspect everyone as you do. I do no lak' you to suspect—my friends, Pierre."

"You speak of that oder man—by the river ? "

She nodded.

"To-day he go away," she said sadly.

Pierre turned her face round and gave a little start as he read the concern within there.

"You are sad because he go ? "

"Yes." ~

"*Mon Dieu !* Then—you—you——"

A little cry left her lips. She tried to escape from him, but he held her tightly.

"Marie—you love this stranger ? "

"Yes," she whispered.

"Much—verra much ? "

"So much that I die if he go and never see me again."

As though ashamed of the confession, she escaped from him, and busied herself with domestic affairs. Pierre stood pondering over this unexpected situation. With all his ferocity, his sullenness, his domineering temperament, he loved Marie much more deeply than she or anyone else believed possible with him. He hated O'Neill all the more now, and yet his hate turned to ashes in his mouth, for to hate O'Neill was akin to hurting his sister—the sweet, delectable Marie, who never before had lost her heart to any man. He went to his room and finished his dressing.

In the meantime O'Neill had arrived at his camp. He commenced to pack up his belongings with a heavy heart, keeping his eyes fixed towards the township for the appearance of Rodd with the prisoner. But an hour passed and Rodd came not. He began to wonder if anything had happened to him, and if it were wiser to have gone with him in view of the antagonistic attitude of the citizens. At length he got his rifle and determined to go in search of the missing man.

He started off, but had gone scarcely twenty yards when a voice hailed him. He turned and saw Paul coming from the direction of the river with three large fishes depending from a string in his hand.

"*Bon jour !*" he said lightly.

"Good morning," returned O'Neill, "you are up early."

"Yes. Always I get up before the sun. The early

bird he catch the worm ; also the early man he catch the fish."

O'Neill laughed to hide his astonishment.

"Your breakfast ? " he queried.

"*Ma foi*, no ! The breakfast he ready long ago. Marie wonder why I am so long. You are leaving us to-day, m'sieur ? "

O'Neill nodded. His keen eyes had seen the figure of Rodd making through the trees to the right of them. He guessed that the policeman had spent the last hour hunting for his quarry.

"Well, I go," said Paul. "Maybe I see you again before you go—yes ? "

"I hope so."

Paul slung the fish over his shoulder, smiled and waved his free hand. He turned to see the grim figure of Rodd bearing down on him. It was evident from his eyes that he anticipated trouble from that direction.

"Hold on," yelled Rodd, "I want you."

Paul stood still, a little frown gathering on his boyish face. O'Neill looked for a sign of fear but saw nothing but annoyance.

"What you want ? "

"You," snapped Rodd. "Put up your hands."

"But——"

"Put 'em up."

Paul dropped the fish and did as he was told. Rodd removed the rifle from Paul's shoulder and a knife from his belt.

"All right," he said. "Now you can't bite ; but I reckon you're safer in these."

There was a jingle of steel and a pair of handcuffs

were clapped on Paul's wrists. For the first time the prisoner's face fell. His lips quivered as he stared at the stout steel rings.

"Why you do this?" he asked.

"I reckon you ain't so ignorant as all that. Maybe you remember a guy called Jacob Dell?"

"Yes. You think I keel him, eh?"

"Nope, I'm sure. Anyway this is no time for argument. Step forward."

He brandished the revolver, and Paul sighed and moved in the direction indicated, pausing once to nod at O'Neill who stood there until they disappeared. A few minutes later he was sitting by the fire with his pack beside him staring stonily at the leaping flames. A soft voice broke his reverie.

"Shane!"

"Marie," he replied, rising to his feet and taking her outstretched hand.

"My brother—Paul—have you seen him?"

"Yes," he replied, unable to meet her eyes.

"Where?"

"Here, just now. The policeman has arrested him—I'm sorry, Marie."

"So he found him," she mused. "He t'ink he keel that bad man, but it is not true. Maybe he can prove he is innocent."

"I hope so."

She gave him a swift glance.

"But you do not think so?"

"The policeman would not arrest him unless he had evidence of his guilt."

"Then why he try to arrest you?" she retorted

quickly. Her glance fell on the big packs beside him, and she read their significance.

"You go away—soon?" she whispered.

"Almost at once."

"A—h!"

The little sigh carried a mountain of emotion. She looked bewitching in the clear morning light, the contour of her figure sharply outlined against the glaring white snow. A silence followed.

"I wish I could tell you how deeply I share your trouble," he said, "at least I know that Dell deserved all he got, and that's what makes it so hard. I hope your brother Pierre and his friends will not interfere with the policeman."

"Why?"

"He is but doing his duty, and has the whole force of the law behind him. No good could come of an interference. Remember that a policeman may have to carry out duties abhorrent to him."

"We shall not interfere," she replied. "Because that policeman he mak' a beeg mistake."

"Are you sure?"

She trembled a little at the question, but met his questioning eyes unflinchingly.

"Quite sure," she replied. "Maybe he take Paul away, but he will come back to us—yes. I was not t'inking of Paul jus' now—but you."

"Me!"

"Yes, because you go away, and you do not lak' to go. Why you go when you sooner stay here?"

"Why do you think I would rather stay?"

"I t'ink I understan' you a leetle. Somet'ing trouble you verra mush. Is it not?"

"Yes, something troubles me, Marie. It troubles me so deeply that life seems scarcely worth living. You will discover before long what it is, and you may hate me."

"No, no."

"But you will."

She laid her hand on his arm, and her face became suffused with tenderness and infinite trust.

"*Mon ami*, it matters not what happens, I shall always remember."

She did not say what it was that should remain in her memory, but the passion that swept her needed no words to express it. O'Neill felt a fierce longing within him—a burning desire to take her to his breast and snatch the love she offered, but his brain was ringing with the bitter reality of things. He was a charlatan—a masquerader—and her love had been born in ignorance of this. Surely the truth must shatter it to fragments; and the shattering was nigh.

"You must not trust me," he said, "I am not a man to be trusted."

"You hurt me when you say such things. Why are you so cruel, so unjust to yourself?"

He turned his head, and started as he beheld Pierre running towards them. Marie followed his glance and uttered a little cry that was like an expression of disappointment. Pierre came up and nodded curtly to O'Neill.

"Come, Marie, our fader return from Quebec," he said.

"Yes, yes—but the policeman get Paul."

Pierre growled something under his breath. He

opened his mouth as though to address O'Neill, but hesitated and remained silent.

"You not go yet ? " said Marie to O'Neill.

"In an hour. May I see you before I leave ? "

"Yes, yes."

Pierre muttered a reluctant "*bon jour* " and he and Marie walked towards the township. When they had disappeared O'Neill sat down and waited for Rodd.

CHAPTER XIX

A VISITOR

WHEN Rodd eventually turned up his face was a study. He rolled a cigarette casually, put it in his mouth and struck a match, which he allowed to burn out without lighting the cigarette.

"Wake up," said O'Neill.

"Yep—wake up it is," snorted Rodd. "You and me's in a hell of a fix, boss."

"What do you mean ?"

"That guy up yonder—he never did the murder."

O'Neill stared at him in silence.

"Say—you're quite sure about the bullet that Dell fired ?"

"Quite."

"And you reckon that the fellow who killed Dell got a bullet through his own skin ?"

"I'm certain of it."

"Then any cuss who isn't wearing a new scar on his body is innocent."

"Rodd, what are you getting at. You don't mean——"

"I sure do," retorted Rodd. "I yanked him in the shack and had him stripped in two shakes. Guess he thought I was loco. Wal, anyway, I'm telling you

that boy has a skin like a new-born babe, sir. It clean knocked me flat."

O'Neill's astonishment gave way to utter bewilderment. The evidence of the revolver, and the letters, clearly pointed to one of the Lestrangle family as the culprit, but the absence of the wound was sufficient to exonerate Paul.

"Maybe that bullet didn't hit him after all," mused Rodd.

O'Neill took the missile from his pocket and examined it.

"I'm absolutely certain on the point," he said.

"Then brother Paul won't swing?"

"No—thank God."

"Wal, I ain't sorry either. I got a liking for that boy. What shall I do with him?"

"Set him free."

"I will. But where are we now. If it wasn't Paul it must have been Pierre."

"Pierre is too big, unless Dell was deluded, and yet——"

"Yep. I guess we made a mistake. Sure enough it was Pierre—shall I git Pierre?" he added eagerly.

"No. We must think of some other way. We can't go making asses of ourselves by arresting one man after another; but I'd like to have a look at Pierre's ribs nevertheless without arousing his suspicions."

"Wal, that's easily done anyway."

"Is it?"

"Sure. You give me an hour and I'll report to you whether he carries the mark or not."

O'Neill shrugged his shoulders. The business was getting irksome. How much easier it would be to let the matter drop and return to Regina to report failure, thereafter severing his connection with the police. But he had never failed to get his man and the tradition clung to him. It seemed a bad finish to a brilliant career to fail at the last "jump." Besides had he not averred to Wren that he would make an arrest?

"How do you propose to deal with Pierre," he asked.

Rodd grinned. He had hit upon a rather cute idea and preferred to keep it to himself.

"You give the word and I'll do the rest," he said.

"All right. Go ahead. While you are busy with Pierre I'll try and get a look at old Lestrangle. He is the apex to the triangle."

"Yep. It might be the old man after all."

Rodd seemed delighted at the prospect of "putting one over" Pierre as he expressed it, and was quickly on the war-path. He took up a position near the Lestrangle house, putting a belt of trees between himself and the edifice, which nevertheless permitted him a view of the entrance. He sat down on a rock with his rifle across his knees, lighted a cigarette and waited.

Half an hour later he saw Marie emerge and walk in the opposite direction—towards the camp of O'Neill. He pursed his lips as he became aware of her intention. It was sun clear to him that something more than friendship existed between her and O'Neill, and although it afforded him huge delight to play tricks

with Pierre, he hoped that worthy would be as innocent of murder as Paul proved to be.

A little later Pierre left the house with an axe slung over his shoulder. He looked in Rodd's direction, and after a moment's hesitation came that way. Rodd waited until Pierre was about to enter the wood, then he raised the rifle and, taking a quick aim at Pierre's waist, fired. He saw Pierre drop the axe and halt with one hand clapped to his right side. Immediately he ran forward.

"Say—did I wing you?" he ejaculated, "I was after a fox. Gee—but you're wounded!"

Pierre cursed and shook his fist. Rodd assumed a regretful attitude.

"I didn't see you," he said. "Guess I'm a bum shot. Here, let's have a look at it."

He flung down his rifle and started to open Pierre's coat. The latter shook him off.

"Don't touch me or I keel you," he roared.

"All right," grumbled Rodd. "But I don't make it a habit of missing foxes and hitting men. Better let me bind it up for you."

He produced a very large handkerchief, and the concern in his eyes had the effect of mollifying Pierre slightly. He grunted and removed his coat, shirt and vest. Rodd saw the slight graze of the bullet and had a look for an older wound, but Pierre's skin was as unmarked as was Paul's.

"Make haste, or I freeze," growled Pierre.

Rodd secured the two ends of the handkerchief and whistled as Pierre quickly rearranged his attire.

"Lucky for you it was only a scratch. Another

two inches and it might have been darned inconvenient for you."

"And for you," retorted Pierre. "What you done with my brudder, you fool?"

"You're right," agreed Rodd. "I made a mistake. I've just discovered Paul didn't do the murder, so I'm sending him back to you."

Pierre's eyes gleamed triumphantly.

"Don't get excited," said Rodd. "I ain't done yet."

"Maybe you t'ink I did it?" said Pierre.

"Nope. But there's your father. Perhaps I'll arrest him a little later on."

Pierre broke into a raucous laugh. The news that Paul was exonerated was pleasing to him.

"I save you from looking a beeg fool again," he said. "On that night, when Dell die our fader never left the house. I was there with him and there are two men heer in St. Claire who can say the same. You hunt for someone you never find. By this time maybe he is t'ousand miles away."

"I guess we'll find him if he's in Jericho," said Rodd and strode off.

O'Neill, perplexed with the change in the situation, was reflecting on the next move. What would Marie think when she heard that he had changed his mind and was staying in St. Claire a little longer? What reason could he give her—except that he found the district so fascinating. What interpretation could she put upon it, other than the one he was most unwilling she should apply.

His reflections were interrupted by the advent of a woman on horseback. She arrived within twenty

yards of the camp before he recognised her. He stood up and literally gasped with astonishment. It was Marcia Ashton. She smiled as she dismounted and hitched her horse to a tree.

"So it is you, Mr. O'Neill," she said.

"It is. But I don't understand how you got here, Miss Ashton."

She laughed merrily.

"My father is at Prince Albert. I came up with him, and there we met Father André, the priest. He was making St. Claire, and as my father is called to Winnipeg it was suggested that I should go back to Regina with Captain Wren, who is arriving here to-morrow from Battleford. I am staying at the Roman Catholic Mission. It was there I heard that a policeman was outside St. Claire. But I couldn't understand it because they said one policeman only."

"I am here incog.—Rodd and I found it convenient to part company. I hope you will keep the matter secret—my name is Shane—plain Shane."

"So you haven't found the murderer yet?"

"No."

"And shall you?"

"I don't know,"

She simulated a horrified expression.

"The infallible O'Neill becoming fallible—impossible!"

"Not impossible, Miss Ashton."

"Well improbable."

"Not even improbable."

"You are merely trying to mislead me to cause all the greater surprise when you finally get your man."

He frowned.

"Thank you," he said coldly.

"Now I've annoyed you."

He made no response, but the affirmative was written clearly on his face.

"Why did you come here to spoil everything?" he said.

"Spoil—how dare you!"

"You forget you are Miss Ashton, the daughter of the Commissioner of Police. You talk to a man who masquerades as a trapper. These people are not fools. If they see you talking to me they will speedily put two and two together."

She turned up her exquisite nose.

"Politeness never was one of your virtues, Mr. O'Neill," she said.

"I have no virtues—and no politeness where duty is concerned."

"It's rather late in the day to speak of duty, isn't it."

"What do you mean?"

"I believe you cease to be a policeman at noon on January 15."

"What difference does that make now? Until noon on that day I am under orders, and I shall carry out the orders to the best of my ability."

"I didn't suggest you would not."

"Pardon me, I thought you intended to convey that."

She toyed with her riding whip in silence. When she looked at him again her antagonistic attitude had vanished.

"I think you take a delight in misunderstanding me," she said softly.

"Why should I?"

"I don't know. But you resent my presence here as much as if I had come deliberately to thwart you. Your success means a great deal to me."

He raised his eyebrows to intimate that this was in the nature of a surprise.

"Oh, I see," he added. "You mean because of your association with the Corps—as the daughter of the commandant?"

"You know I meant nothing of the kind," she said petulantly.

"Excluding that I cannot see that you can be even interested in my—exploits."

"Nevertheless I am."

"May I ask why?"

"Perhaps it's just a woman's inquisitiveness."

"Yes—I suppose that explains much."

"More than you think."

The conversation seemed to be leading nowhere, yet that was not Marcia's intention. What she lacked was a "jumping-off place." Seeing O'Neill again, aroused all her old passion, but short of making deliberate love to him, there seemed no way of bringing him to realise that she regarded him with eyes of desire.

"I am sorry you are not pleased to see me, O'Neill," she said.

"You do me an injustice," he replied. "Most men are glad to behold a beautiful woman, but circumstances dominate situations."

"I do not think beautiful women ever enter into your scheme of life," she said impulsively.

To her surprise he started and then laughed lightly.

"I suppose there is a time in most men's lives when a woman enters, and sometimes she enters at a very awkward moment," he replied enigmatically.

She would have given worlds to have known just what lay behind the words. The glance he had given her might have meant anything.

"I must go," she said with a sigh. "Perhaps I may see you to-morrow. If not, then at Regina when you return with your captive."

"Perhaps."

She walked across to the horse, and waited for him to assist her into the saddle. She put her small foot into the palm of his hand, then slipped and lost her grip of the pommel. She fell gracefully into O'Neill's arms with her cheek against his. Amazed at this remarkable accident, he stood for a second in a state of bewilderment, aware that in some strange way her lips had touched his. It caused him to blush furiously, but it was not so much due to embarrassment as to anger. Without a word he hoisted her into position and turned to see Marie regarding him with querulous eyes.

CHAPTER XX

ON THE BRINK

MARCIA applied her whip to the horse with more force than was necessary, and drove him within a few feet of the waiting Marie. She passed on without so much as a glance at the second girl, but her eyes had taken in one unwelcome fact—her rival was young and beautiful.

Marie approached O'Neill and took his proffered hand a trifle diffidently. He could not fail to notice the sudden change in her manner, and suspected that it was due to the incident that had just taken place.

"I jus' came to say good-bye," said Marie. "You said you go in one hour."

"I have changed my mind, Marie. I shall stay a few days longer."

"Ah—I see—you meet a friend, yes. The lady who was here jus' now."

"I had made up my mind before that, Marie."

Her soft eyes regarded him keenly.

"Then she make no difference at all ? "

"Not the slightest. She met me by accident, and recognised me as a friend of the past. I believe she is leaving to-morrow."

"I t'ink she not want to leave," she mused.

"What do you mean ? "

"She seem verra pleased to see you."

"More pleased than I was to see her. But come, I wish to forget her. I have some good news for you. I met the policeman again and learn that Paul is to be set free."

Her face brightened at the news, but a curious expression followed. It was as if she suddenly became aware of some other imminent danger that would follow this piece of good news.

"Why he release my brudder ? " she asked.

"I suppose he found that his alleged evidence was wrong."

"He have no evidence at all," she protested.

"Well, he thought he had. Anyway, let us forget it. I am very glad Paul is to be set at liberty."

She nodded, but her eyes still retained their rather sad expression.

"Why, Marie," he laughed. "You should be glad and yet you look miserable. Have I disappointed you in prolonging my stay ? "

"It is but for a few days," she complained.

"But how much one can crowd into a day. Come, let us laugh and be glad."

His unusual merriment caused her to regard him with astonishment.

"Always you are a riddle," she said. "But an hour ago you were sad and now you laugh and look pleased. Why are you pleased ? "

"I am always pleased when a beautiful girl is in the offing," he said banteringly.

"Then you were pleased jus' now when Miss Ashton come to see you."

"Miss Ashton!" he gasped.

"That is her name. They say her fader is at Prince Albert and that he is chief of the police. Is it not so?"

"Yes. But how did you know?"

"I heer. She tell people that when she come las' night."

O'Neill shrugged his shoulders. It was just like Marcia to publish broadcast the fact that she was Ashton's daughter.

"You do not like her, Marie," he said.

"*Mais non*. I hate her."

"Oh come, hate is an unworthy sentiment. You must not hate people."

Her eyes flashed.

"Why should I not hate her. She is not good—no. She look at me so as if I am noding at all. And she look at you when you left her on the horse as if——"

"Marie, does it matter in the least how she looked at me?"

"Yes, it matters much—because——"

"Because—what?"

She was at a loss for a reply. It was obvious that the incident rankled in her heart. O'Neill touched her gaily on the arm.

"Marie—you look as fierce and relentless as any tiger. You disappoint me."

"Eh?"

"I regard you as something sweet and sunny—something charming to the eye, and soothing to the

soul. I do not like to see you look as you are looking now."

She hung her head for a few seconds and when she raised it again her eyes were moist.

"You are right," she murmured, "I will not hate again if you wish it not."

"Is it merely a question of what I wish?"

"Yes," she replied simply.

"Why?"

"Because when you go and leave me I want for you to t'ink of me always just as though I am—what you said. You will try to do that?"

Her eloquent eyes were turned to him, their long lashes still moist with the recent tears. The desire to take her in his arms there and then was almost irresistible, yet he still felt a masquerader. Until he had cleared his conscience such things were impossible.

"I shall never forget you, Marie," he said. "You have brought joy to a life that was very blank."

"Sometimes I t'ink I bring sorrow to you," she said. "For you look at me so strangely."

"I know," he muttered, "but there was a reason."

"A reason!"

A resolution took hold of him to tell her now—to rid himself of the thing that acted as a barrier and risk the consequences.

"Suppose I am not what you think me, Marie?" he said tensely.

"That is impossible, for I t'ink of you only as my—my dearest friend."

"Your dearest friend!"

"Someone who came out of nowhere and mak' me t'ink sweet things and dream beautiful dreams—I——"

He caught her hands and stopped her.

"Listen," he said. "You must hear the truth—however much it may hurt you—and me. I——"

"Marie!" The cry came from near at hand and Paul suddenly appeared on the scene. He ran forward and gripped Marie's two hands, swinging her round in a kind of dance.

"That policeman—he let me go. By Gar, he is mad—mad."

"But why is he mad? You are innocent," she murmured.

"Yes, but he tak' me up there, push me into a corner, and move all the clothes from my back, then he swear, fling back the clothes and go out. Hours go and he come back and tak' off the handcuffs and tell me I am free——"

Marie was regarding him in absolute amazement.

"Took off your clothes!" she gasped.

Paul spread out his hand and laughed. To him it appeared most amusing.

"I t'ink he drink much whisky and lose his senses," he said. "For why he do a mad thing lak' that? But I am verra glad because now he worry us no more. He say 'I am through with you, bo—git' and I git verra quick!"

O'Neill laughed at Paul's whimsical countenance.

"I congratulate you," he said. "The policeman ought to have known better."

Paul turned to Marie.

"Come, we tell Pierre the good news," he said.

"Yes, yes," she murmured, but showed no great anxiety to be gone.

O'Neill held out his hand to her and she took it slowly, regarding him with questioning eyes.

"Will you meet me by the river, near the fish-holes, at sunset?" he said.

She nodded.

"Good—I will tell you everything then, and you may judge me accordingly."

They left him, and five minutes later Rodd appeared.

"Wal, I let him go," he said.

"I know. He thinks you are mad."

"I gotta hunch we're both mad, O'Neill. This thing has got me beat. It wasn't Paul and it wasn't Pierre, and it's a hayseed to a gold mine it wasn't old Lestrangle. We're on the wrong tack after all—we've failed."

"Thank God!" muttered O'Neill.

"Eh!"

"Nothing. It means we must start all over again."

"Yep—but where do we begin?"

"With the revolver. There must be another weapon of that make in St. Claire. All you have to do is to find it."

"Find it!" ejaculated Rodd. "Why Flood took nearly all the firearms. Nope. I reckon whoever did that murder is safe for ever. But ain't it queer it wasn't one of the Lestranges. Any man would have banked on it."

"It shows how unwise it is to draw premature conclusions. It certainly looked as though Dell's death was connected with that of Celeste. Anyway, Rodd

we've got to follow up any likely trail wherever it leads."

"Sure."

"And, Rodd—who do you think is in St. Claire ? "

"Search me ! "

"Marcia Ashton."

Rodd whistled and his eyes twinkled.

"Still hunting you."

"Hunting me ! " ejaculated O'Neill.

"Wal, who else would she hunt ? Gee, but you're a blind man when it comes to women."

"But Marcia is practically engaged to Captain Wren."

"Yep, practically. She's been *practically* engaged to a dozen officers of the Corps in my time. She's peaches to look at, but when old man Satan was dealing out guile to red injuns I reckon Marcia got a dose by mistake. Say—you ain't falling to that, are you ? "

O'Neill's anger vanished at the sight of Rodd's concerned visage. He laughed merrily.

"You know more about women than I gave you credit for," he replied. "No, I don't think I'm 'falling to that.' "

"Wal, that's a relief, anyway. A man like you would have a hell of a time with a woman like that. I could see the divorce courts gittin' busy. Pretty faces are all very well in magazines but no good on a housewife."

"You have queer notions, Rodd."

"No queerer than yorn. I've heard you say some cruel things about women."

"Have you ? I must have been drunk. Anyway,

Rodd, I promise to consult the oracle if ever I think of taking a wife."

"The what?"

"The oracle—you."

"Aw—I get you. Hadn't you better be starting in right now?" he drawled.

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, nothin' much. But all my eyes ain't on this murder affair—not much. O'Neill, last night I had a horrible dream."

"Tell it to the cows," retorted O'Neill, "I don't want to hear it. Who wants to listen to bad dreams on a day like this?"

"Oh, it's a fine day I'll allow," grumbled Rodd.

"But I saw a black cat just now. I remember seeing a creature like that one——"

O'Neill slapped him violently on the back and stopped his utterance. In his heart he was thanking God he had failed. The world was a brighter place now that the blow that seemed destined to fall upon Marie was averted. In a few short hours the masquerade would be ended and he would be free to ask for what most his soul desired. Bad dreams—forsooth! What room was there for bad dreams and black cats?

CHAPTER XXI

POISON

THE sun was crimsoning the snow as Marie left the house and made for the river bank. Her heart was full of strange premonitions which, however, were kept in check by the thought of meeting O'Neill. She wondered what it was he had to tell her, and if the revelation would be of such a nature as to shatter the sacred dream on which she had built. But she laughed away her fears and sang as she ran across the frozen snow.

She had scarcely left the township when she ran into Marcia whose presence there was due more to design than accident, for the conversation of the afternoon had fallen upon ears other than those for which it was intended. She had wheeled her horse round upon leaving O'Neill, returning a few minutes later almost to the spot she had left. It had been a simple matter to lie hid among the pines behind the tent and to play the part of eavesdropper—an action which she excused on the grounds that a policeman on active service had no right to fraternise with a pretty girl.

"Good evening, Miss Lestrangle," she said softly.

Marie returned the greeting coldly and was about

to walk on when a remark from Marcia rooted her to the spot.

"If you are going to meet Mr.—er—Shane, will you be good enough to tell him I am sorry I cannot keep the appointment."

"Who say I am going there ? " queried Marie.

Marcia laughed.

"I guessed it. Come, I'm right, aren't I ? "

Marie was silent. There was something sinister in the affected smile that baffled her.

"Silence gives consent—in other words affirmation. I congratulate you."

"Thank you. But I do not need it."

"Why not ? Mister Shane is a great favourite—with women."

"I suppose that is why you hunt heem so," retorted Marie.

"Hunt him ? How dare you ! "

"Oh, but I see everything this afternoon. You mak' love to heem."

"Make love——"

"Yes—but not with your lips. With your eyes and your body. You t'ink he is that sort of man. You do not know heem——"

Marcia laughed harshly. Much as the jibe hurt her, she was careful to conceal the fact. There was a subtler way to get even with Marie.

"Not know him !" she said. "I have known him more years than you have weeks. We are very old—friends."

"I do not think so."

"Why not ? "

"A friend does not hide behind trees to hear things that are not for her to hear."

Marcia was staggered at the totally unexpected thrust. She blushed furiously and strove to be indignant.

"So you know," she said after a pause.

"Yes. I expect you to do that, and I keep my ears open."

"I did it for your sake."

"My sake. *Sacre !* "

"You do not believe me, but it is true. I wanted to find out if you were foolish enough to care for the man."

Marie looked dangerous. She advanced on Marcia, her small hands moving spasmodically and her dark eyes ablaze.

"Wait ! " hissed Marcia. "Despite the fact that you insulted me just now I will tell you something to your advantage. You love that man, don't you ? "

"I will not speak of heem to *you*."

"That is sufficient confession. Has he ever spoken to you of his past ? I see he has not. You believe him to be free to accept your love—well, he isn't."

Marie choked.

"I wanted to warn you," resumed Marcia, "before it is too late. He has a wife at a place called Buffalo Lake."

"A wife ! "

"An Indian woman—I suppose he calls her his wife. There is also——"

"Stop ! Stop ! "

"No—you shall hear the truth. There is also a child there. The woman's name is Summer Moon."

"You lie," cried Marie. "Why you lie to me lak' that?"

"It is true. Ask him when you see him."

Marie was calling to memory the strange actions and words of the man she loved. Marcia's story seemed to make the whole thing clear. It was this then that O'Neill was going to confess—was doubtless waiting to do so now. She hated Marcia more than ever for apprising her in advance. Painful as it was it were better to have heard it from his own lips. What was more certain than that this woman had told her out of a desire for revenge. The knowledge made her blood boil.

"If this is true then you are—despicable—for you knew it, and yet you mak' love to heem—I saw you pretend to fall from the horse that you might nearly kiss heem. Yes, yes. Oh, *mon Dieu*, how I hate you!"

"So that is all the gratitude——"

"I t'ink you are a terr'ble bad woman," said Marie. "I wish I never see you. You t'ink perhaps he may love you—then I tell you he despises you lak' I do."

She turned on her heels and strode away, her heart aching at this cruel denouement. What was the use of sceing O'Neill now? Everything seemed perfectly clear except one thing—the circumstances that had driven O'Neill to such an action. A squaw man!—it seemed impossible, and yet——"

She was about to turn back when his big figure loomed up along the river. A new resolution took hold of her—to hear the truth from his own lips. That at least was due to him. Inwardly she admired him for his honest purpose in wishing to tell her.

"Marie!" he called.

She waved her hand limply and walked towards him.

"I thought I saw you further down with someone, but I couldn't be certain as the light was going."

"It was I," she replied. "I met that woman who is staying at the Mission House."

"Marcia Ashton?" he ejaculated.

"Yes—she stop me."

"I didn't know you knew her."

"I do not—but she stop me."

The strange expression in her eyes puzzled him, and the fact that Marcia had talked with Marie added to his perplexity.

"You look sad, Marie," he said. "It makes what I have to tell you all the more difficult."

"Perhaps there is no need to tell me," she said.

"Great God! You know?"

She nodded her head.

"And yet you could come and meet me."

"I—I wanted to hear it from your own lips."

"I see," he muttered grimly. "She told you—she broke faith like that."

"Then it is true," she said.

"Yes. I wanted to tell you, Marie. I wanted to clear my conscience—to know if you could understand and forgive."

She choked and looked away. It seemed to him that she was even more affected than circumstances rendered reasonable. Why were there tears in her eyes now that Paul was free?

"I understand," she murmured. "But there is nothing to forgive. Wherever you go, you may know

that I am thinking of you always. Oh, Shane, I hope she is good to you."

"She!"

"The woman—Summer Moon."

He gazed at her in speechless amazement. At last Marcia's part was made clear to him.

"Summer Moon!" he gasped at length. "Did she give you to understand—Marie, you don't mean that you believed I had—an Indian wife!"

"Then it is not true, and that boy she spoke of——"

"Boy? Yes, yes—I see now how she came to think that. But that you should believe it. That she should poison your mind——"

Shame and self-reproach filled her eyes. Mixed with her gladness at this unexpected shattering of the lie was the pain of having misjudged him.

"You say you have somet'ing to tell me and you act lak' one who has some secret. Then she tell me and I t'ink—Oh, *mon Dieu*, can you ever forgive me?"

She broke down and hid her head in her hands, her shoulders quivering. He stood for a second motionless, embarrassed by this display of emotion. Then he took her gently in his arms and strove to calm her.

"You need not reproach yourself, Marie. It was logical that you should think that. But if it were true would it matter—much?"

"Yes," she sobbed.

"Because you think it shameful for a white man to take an Indian wife?"

She said nothing.

"Was it that?" he urged.

"No," she murmured.

"Then it is because you—you——"

She turned her tear-stained face upwards and gazed at him with limitless love radiating from it.

"You know," she whispered. "You must know."

A little cry of gladness escaped him.

"It was because you love me. Tell me that—say you love me. Speak the words with your own lips."

"Yes—I——"

"No, no. Not yet—there is something I must tell you before you speak. I want to be my true self to you—to hide nothing."

"It is not about another woman?" she asked with a smile.

"Oh, no, something very different. It can make no difference now, but I want nothing to loom between our—love."

She crooned with joy at the expression and clung closer to him. He felt her lithe warm body very near to him. A wisp of hair played on his face and her red lips lay like a rose beneath his bent head.

"Tell me," she murmured. "I fear nothing—now."

His arm slipped down from her shoulder and tightened about her waist. The red perfect lips and the gleaming teeth were intoxicating. She seemed to be waiting for the first lover's kiss, almost swooning with delightful anticipation.

"You need not tell me, dear," she whispered. "Kiss me—now."

He strained her to his bosom, forgetting his strength in that moment of bliss. To his amazement the smile

left her face, and a sharp cry of pain escaped her lips.

"Marie ! "

"You—you hurt me," she said.

He released his arm and saw her hand fly to her right side. The movement fascinated him—held him speechless with its dire significance. He swayed as he stood there in all the agony of his awakening reason.

"Why you look lak' that ? " she asked.

His lips moved but no sound escaped them.

"You—you are ill, yes."

"Yes, ill," he murmured. "Sick unto death, Marie. You must go."

"Oh, I do not understand. This is terr'ble. Jus' now you——"

"Something has happened, Marie," he said. "My little demon has come back with all his damned torture. Please—please go. I want to think. To-morrow morning I will come to you and tell you—what I was going to tell you to-night."

"You want me to leave you ? " she quivered.

He came towards her and held her trembling hand in his.

"Dear, girl, I cannot explain now. You must trust me—to do the right thing when I have discovered what it is."

She sobbed and he released her hand.

"I go," she said. "You nearly break my heart, but I trust you, *mon cher*, always."

A few minutes later, O'Neill sat by his camp fire, staring into the flames, with sleepless eyes, and a turbulent brain. Love had come to him—clean,

wholesome, soul-consuming love, and with it had been born the almost certain fact that the girl for whom his whole being craved was the slayer of Jacob Dell.

CHAPTER XXII

THE PANGS OF DUTY

THE long night passed and the morning broke in all its glory. O'Neill still sat by the fire which he had automatically fed from the wood pile behind him. Rodd had dropped into camp the preceding evening only to be curtly dismissed in manner unusual. He had gone back to his shack in a huff at what he considered to be an undeserved rebuff. Something was wrong with O'Neill, but what? Rodd racked his brain and could find no solution.

He came to O'Neill soon after sunrise and stood looking at him in bewilderment. It was obvious to him that O'Neill had sat exactly in the same position for nearly twelve hours.

"Are you ill?" he queried.

O'Neill stared into space.

"Say, what's wrong?" insisted Rodd.

"Does it look as if anything was wrong?"

"It sure does. Why ain't you bin to bed, and what's turned your face into a mummy's?"

"I've been thinking, Rodd."

"Ah—you got a habit of thinkin' too much. I got nothin' to say agin thinkin' when its done quick,

but a whole night of it is enough to kill anything on two legs."

He waited for O'Neill to say something and minutes passed in absolute silence. At last the latter stood up, his eyes shining with a strange light.

"Our business up here is over," he said.

"Wal, that's good news anyway. When do we hit the trail?"

"To-day—after we have made an arrest."

"Arrest! Who are we going to arrest now. I thought we were through with that."

"We shall be in a few hours' time. I've found the—the person we want."

Rodd's eyebrows went up.

"Eh—what's that?"

"We have vindicated ourselves, Rodd. At last I have discovered who killed Jacob Dell."

"Who was it?"

O'Neill's mouth twitched.

"Marie Lestrangle," he said in a tense whisper.

"Gee! It can't be!"

"It is."

Rodd was unusually perturbed. He walked round and round the fire, shaking his head and swearing alternately. At last he stopped his perambulation and strode up to O'Neill.

"Wal, and what are you going to do about it?"

"Arrest her and take her back to Regina."

"Arrest Marie! Man—you can't do that."

O'Neill stared at him fiercely.

"And why not?"

"Because—Wal you ought to know." He worked himself into a temper. "See here, O'Neill, I'm as

good a policeman as most I reckon, and I don't kick at the traces often, but I ain't in this, not on your life. Are you going to put that girl away for the sake of a dirty swine like Dell. And there's another reason why it ain't nacheral—you know it."

"There's no reason at all, Rodd. For God's sake don't weaken me. You came to these conclusions in a few seconds and I've spent all night trying to discover where my duty lies. The Corps made me, Rodd. It took me out of the gutter and gave me opportunity. It turned me from a useless parasite into something with a conscience and a will to do. Would you have me go back on it now just because it clashes with my private interests? Do you think I could look another man in the face if I betrayed the Corps?"

"But in a fortnight you won't be in the Corps," argued Rodd.

"What difference does that make? I am in it now and it is the present that we live in."

Rodd pulled a long face.

"O'Neill," he whispered, "I ain't an inquisitive guy by nature, but do you love that girl?"

There was no need for any affirmative reply. The pain in O'Neill's eyes was evidence enough. Rodd growled something unintelligible. He looked towards the woods as a noise met his ears.

"It's the boys," he said.

The squadron came galloping along. Wren, who was in charge, halted them and permitted them to "dismiss" for a few minutes. They came rushing at Rodd and O'Neill, whooping like a pack of Indians.

"Still here, O'Neill," said Bramble. "Any luck?"

"None—yet."

"Well, buck up. I've got a bet on with Fortesque."

"A bet?"

"Yes. I've given him two to one you'll get your man."

O'Neill frowned, to Bramble's astonishment.

"I wish you wouldn't take such things so lightly," he grunted.

"Oh come, you're getting sentimental. The great and fearsome O'Neill a weak humanitarian, well!"

A murmur of amusement went up. To O'Neill's relief Wren came along and the crowd scattered.

"We're making Saskatoon," he said, "and then Regina. I thought we might take back that prisoner of yours."

"I haven't any prisoner yet, sir——"

"But you said——"

"I was wrong. The case is a little more complicated than I imagined."

"To be frank, O'Neill, I thought you were a trifle optimistic."

"My optimism has vanished, sir."

"Well, well—your trip up here has been well worth while for it settled Flood's little game. You have not changed your mind in the matter of your retirement?"

"No, sir—I stand by that. At noon on January 15th I cease to be a policeman."

Wren laughed amusedly.

"Really, O'Neill, you are very punctilious—working to minutes. By the way, I was to meet Miss Ashton in St. Claire. Do you know if she has arrived yet?"

"She is here, sir. You will find her at the Mission House."

Wren's eyes twinkled. O'Neill reflected that here was another good man eager to waste his life on someone not quite worthy of him.

"Well, good-bye—I wish you luck, O'Neill."

O'Neill saluted gravely and watched the gay squadron mount and ride away. Rodd sighed as they disappeared.

"Fine lot o' chaps," he said. "Not a care in the world. About that gal—Marie—ain't there no way out?"

"None. We're here to arrest the guilty person. Run up to the shack and bring down the dogs and all the gear. I'll be packing up here."

"But——"

"Hurry!"

Rodd marched off and O'Neill began to get his things together. An hour later he was sitting on his packs listening to the tinkle of bells coming through the wood. The dogs hove into sight and were pulled up near the tent.

"Here we are," growled Rodd.

"Throw me my uniform."

Rodd picked it up and gave it to him. He disappeared into the tent and soon reappeared clad in the garb of the N.W.M.P. Rodd helped him to dismantle the tent and pack it into the sleigh.

"What now?" he queried.

"Hitch up the team so that we can make an instant departure."

Rodd obeyed and came back to his waiting comrade. Without a word O'Neill commenced to walk towards

the township. Their entry into the "street" caused not a little excitement. Hank Fenley from the window of "The Stars" hotel gave out the news to a score of men within. They rushed to the door.

"Did you see that?" exclaimed Hank. "That feller with the red hair—he's a policeman. What's the game?"

O'Neill and Rodd paid not the slightest attention to the amazed spectators but continued on their way in silence until they stood outside the door of Marie's house. Rodd took a glance at his companion and saw that his mouth was set and his eyes cold. Without a moment's hesitation O'Neill raised the latch and entered, with Rodd close behind. Old Lestrang and Pierre were sitting by the fire reading some newspapers evidently brought from Quebec. Marie was sewing at a small table, but Paul was nowhere to be seen.

"I regret the intrusion——" commenced O'Neill, but got no further for Pierre who had recognised him flung his chair aside and leapt forward.

"You swine!" he hissed. "A spy—eh—a police spy!"

He became aware that somehow Rodd's revolver had appeared in his hand, and he knew by the look on that worthy's face that he stood on very dangerous ground. He backed away trembling with rage. Marie seemed as though she were rooted to the floor. The needlework was still held in her fingers and the hand that held the needle shook like an aspen leaf.

"Mister Shane!" she ejaculated.

"No, Trooper O'Neill of the North West Police."

"Why you come here?" hissed the old man.

•

"I am sorry I must arrest your daughter, Lestrangle."

Lestrangle was on his feet in a moment, more self-controlled than Pierre but equally antagonistic.

"Nevaire!" he muttered.

"I must warn you of the consequences of any attempt to obstruct——"

Pierre suddenly seized a chair and swung it round his head. There was a flash and the back of it, which he held in his hand, was shattered by a bullet from Rodd. The chair dropped with a crash.

"That might have been you, sonny," quoth Rodd. "We're here on duty and ain't seeking or taking trouble."

O'Neill walked across to Marie.

"Will you come—quietly?" he asked.

She looked into his eyes.

"Was it this you were going to tell me last night?" she whispered huskily.

"Yes."

"You arrest me for the—keeling of that man?"

"Yes."

"Very well—I come. I keel——"

"Not a word, please."

She turned to the wild-eyed old man.

"It is right that I should go—papa. If you love me do nothing against the law."

"Marie!" he pleaded.

She kissed him and looked at Pierre.

"You too, Pierre."

But Pierre was of a very different calibre. His eyes flashed madly as he took her kiss. He thumped the table with his hand.

"I bring you back—yes I. This dog, he come

here and steal from you love, that he may triumph. Heem I will keel before a night has passed. Somet'ing tell me he was a snake in the grass—a dog without a name who bites——”

“Go on,” snapped Rodd, rendered furious by the look of agony in O'Neill's eyes and by Marie's vain attempt to stop the vicious tongue. “Just two more words and I'll drill you as sure as my name is Hiram Rodd.”

He was actually on the verge of pulling the trigger when O'Neill intervened.

“Stop that, Rodd. Let him speak if he wants to.”

But Marie's fingers were already over Pierre's lips. She whispered something in his ear and then bravely smiled as she put on her coat.

“I am ready,” she said, holding out her wrists for the handcuffs. O'Neill shook his head and stepped aside for her to pass. Rodd followed immediately after. O'Neill waited until the door was closed and then turned to Pierre.

“You expressed a desire to kill me just now,” he said. “I would prefer that to giving up—the woman I love. You may put your wish into operation now, but it would make no difference. Other men would come and you couldn't kill them all. But shoot if you think it to your interest.”

Pierre glared at him and turned away. Old Les-trange came forward.

“I t'ink I understand, m'sieur—but does not love come before duty ? ” he said.

“I would to God it did. I am sorry for you, sir, but do not be prompted to any rash action. It would build sorrow on sorrow.”

The old man said nothing and O'Neill quickly left the room. He found Rodd outside anxiously waiting.

"To the sleigh," he said. "Don't take the main street. Quick!—the roundabout route through the woods."

He took Marie's hand in his and the three sped through the trees. From time to time he looked at his prisoner's face but found there nothing but quiet resignation—not even rebuke.

CHAPTER XXIII

CAPTOR AND CAPTIVE

FOR hour after hour the sleigh glided down the well-packed trail, making extraordinary progress despite the heavy freight. Fear of pursuit had now vanished and a score of miles lay between them and St. Claire. No word had passed between O'Neill and Marie since they had left the hut. She sat in the front of the long sleigh watching the movements of the fierce team with the whip cracking over her head as O'Neill drove them unmercifully towards the distant goal.

They stopped once to make tea, and then took the trail again. The sun set and the waning moon came up to disappear an hour later, leaving but the stars to illuminate the gloom. The dogs lagged as exhaustion overtook them but progress was continued until it seemed the beasts must drop. At length the driver called a halt, amid a circle of black pines. The dogs were fed and Rodd commenced to build a fire. O'Neill came to Marie and broke his long silence.

"Are you cold ? " he queried.

"No."

He sat on the side of the sleigh very close to her.

"Do you hate me much ? "

She shook her head and smiled.

"Do you t'ink I not understand?"

"Not everything. I want you to know that I would rather be dead than doing what I do now. I wanted to, tell you last night I was happy because I thought your brothers were exonerated from further suspicion. It was only at that—that divine moment—I discovered the bitter truth. That possibility had never entered my mind."

"And you do not hate me because I—because you t'ink I do that dreadful t'ing?" she asked anxiously.

"No. I have not a grain of pity in my heart for that man."

"Then I am glad. Oh, Shane, my sister was the sweetest girl in all the world."

"I cannot quite accept that," he said.

"Ah—but you did not know her."

"But I know another," he said fervently. "Marie, she could not be sweeter or braver than you. Even now I find it difficult to believe that you can appreciate the situation."

"But why not?"

"You are so calm. Are you not afraid?"

"Not as much afraid as I was yesterday when that girl tell me a lie. But why you not tell me las' night that you were O'Neill the policeman?"

"I wasn't sure that it was my duty to arrest you. For a time, Marie, I thought seriously of remaining Shane the hunter until the end—to forget what I had discovered."

"Was it so hard then to arrest—me?"

"Hard!" He screwed up his face.

"I tell you somet'ing," she whispered. "If you

had acted lak' that—played traitor to the police, and I knew it, then my love go as swift as the swallow. I t'ink of you always as an honourable man. If they hang me——”

“Marie !” he ejaculated. “Don't speak of such horrors. That is outside possibilities. But, my dear, they may take you away for many years.”

Her eyes grew wistful.

“But I come out again one day ?”

“Yes.”

“And you ?”

“I ?—I shall be waiting. Though I may be old and grey I shall be waiting near by.”

A little sigh of joy left her lips and she inclined her head so that it rested against his shoulder.

“It is difficult to believe you are my prisoner,” he said. “I make a poor gaoler with my heart all aflame.”

“Suppose I try to escape ?”

“You have the right.”

“And what you do then ?”

“Follow you and bring you back.”

She looked towards the north and sighed as she thought of her father and brothers impotent in the face of the law. O'Neill heard the sigh and took her hand in his.

“I know it's hard,” he whispered.

“I was t'inking of Paul—I never say good-bye to Paul and he loves me so.”

“How could anyone help loving you,” he breathed.

“Even now doubting comes at times. To give you up, Marie, is like giving up my soul.”

“Hush ! Does love grow less by waiting ? Each day will bring us one day nearer. All the time I shall

t'ink of that glad day when I meet you again never to part. Then maybe you tak' me back to St. Claire so I be near my people." Her eyes grew dim. "Shane, maybe I lose my youth then and be plain—verra plain—and my hair all white and thin and my body bent——"

"That is the price we are giving for the life of a dog like Dell," he said bitterly. "God, but it's unnatural—infamous ! "

She pulled his head down and kissed him passionately on the lips. Then she laughed and strove to throw off the dark cloak that had settled on them. A little later the three were seated round the fire partaking of the evening meal.

"It's going to snow," said Rodd, who considered the weather a safe topic.

"It'll be hard going if it does," observed O'Neill.

"How far is it to Regina ? " asked Marie casually.

"Ten days on a good trail, but the snow'll hold us up," said O'Neill.

Rodd gazed at the stars. He seemed to be making queer calculations by means of his fingers.

"What's wrong, Rodd ? "

"Nothin'."

Marie laughed at Rodd's expression. He was glaring at O'Neill as though they were deadly enemies instead of staunch friends. Then he grunted something about the tent and left the fire to erect the latter.

"Guess Miss Lestrangle will take that," he said.

O'Neill nodded.

"But where you sleep ? " asked Marie.

"Under the stars."

"Oh, but——"

"We are used to it—besides you will be safer in the tent. I warn you I sleep very lightly," he said, with an attempt at jocularly.

Later Marie retired and O'Neill and Rodd slipped into their sleeping-bags. O'Neill spread himself out in front of the tent whilst Rodd found a less exposed spot among the trees. Complete silence reigned for a few minutes and then Marie's head appeared round the flap of the tent.

"You have not said good-night," she complained.

O'Neill stared up at her and pulled himself into a sitting position. Her head descended and her lips met his.

"Good-night, my dear," she whispered and vanished.

In the morning they were off again, beating through the fine snow that had commenced to fall immediately after they awoke. Rivers and lakes were passed, all wrapped in grey. The trees but recently bare and black were now gathering a new garment of white. The trail became almost obliterated and the dogs floundered up to their haunches in deep drifts.

They camped early that evening and hoped that the morning would find the sky clear, but when morning broke the snow was still falling. A foot of it lay on the ground, flecked with frosty jewels and almost blinding them with the reflected light.

Thereafter it was heavy going. Rodd doing mental arithmetic nodded his head wisely. He was calculating the miles to Regina and the time that intervened between the present and January the fifteenth. As the days passed so the heart of O'Neill grew heavier. Marie, too, seemed to be less at ease. The whole thing

seemed fantastic and unreal. In the evening she and O'Neill sat apart from Rodd, talking such things as lovers delight in, almost forgetful of the cruel circumstances that beset them. It had seemed comparatively easy to speak of the future when Regina lay two hundred miles away, but now it was different. Each evening witnessed a more and more protracted "good-night" embrace between them. Rodd, whose eyes were almost as swift as his gun, saw the drama developing to its climax.

"You're going through with it?" he queried.

O'Neill glared at him.

"What would you have me do, Rodd?" he asked after a long pause.

"Dunno. But ain't there a way out?"

"None—except a dishonourable one."

"Regina is less than fifty miles away."

"I know."

"Then why in hell are you in such a hurry to make it?"

O'Neill looked at him from under his long lashes.

"I know what you're driving at, Rodd, but that is not my idea of playing the game. I'm going to keep up the regulation pace."

"All right—go your own way."

"I mean to—what would you do in the circumstances?"

"I ain't answering conundrums like that. But if ever I wished I wasn't in the Force, it's now. Gee! I'd cut in and whisk that gal outer your clutches quicker than greased lightning."

"I wish you could," muttered O'Neill.

Then Marie came up and Rodd strolled away. For

the first time in his hard life Rodd felt sentimental. O'Neill was going to wreck his life for the sake of honour, and it hurt Rodd far worse than any physical calamity. A born misogynist, he regarded Marie as he would any other bright and charming girl. She aroused utterly no emotion in his breast. But O'Neill was another matter. O'Neill was the "real stuff." He and O'Neill had shared rations together many a time when the odds were all against their ever returning to barracks. Once O'Neill had risked his life for this pugnacious ex-cow puncher. Rodd had never forgotten that. But how to get O'Neill out of this fix taxed his mental capacity to the utmost.

"If she steps inside Regina she's done for," he mused. "What'll they deal out to her?—ten years solitary maybe. That'll sure kill the boss. Nope—it can't be done, and it ain't going to be while this child breathes."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE WAY OUT

THE next day was one of silence on the part of the *voyageurs*. Through twenty miles of thick snow no word passed between O'Neill and Marie. Rodd saw that their hearts were too full for conversation. What they had to say were better said in secret. He guessed that the evening would find them together talking for the last time of that wonderful future that seemed to lie so far distant.

They halted under the banks of a frozen stream and commenced to camp for the night. During the meal but a few remarks passed between them. Rodd speedily left the fire and found a resting-place on a fallen tree. He sat down and began to smoke. Some time passed and still he sat there gathering inspiration from the helpful pipe.

When at length he returned to the camp fire O'Neill and Marie were sitting in the same place, the flames illuminating their faces and revealing their tense expressions.

He seated himself on the other side of the fire, and waited the opportunity which he sought. He was waiting for O'Neill to smoke, but the latter seemed too

occupied with other things. He heard them murmuring together and let his head sink on to his chest. Half an hour passed and then to his joy he saw O'Neill feeling in his pocket, from which Rodd had deftly removed the pipe some hours before.

"You wish to smoke?" queried Marie.

"Yes. I must have lost my pipe. Rodd! Have you—why, he's asleep! Never mind."

"But yes—I lak' the tobacco. Maybe the pipe is in the sleigh. Shall I get heem?"

"No—I'll go. It's just up the bank."

"You won't be long?"

"A minute."

He rose to his feet and disappeared behind the tent. Marie looked across at the still figure of Rodd from whose nose came weird noises, supposed to be snores. It surprised her somewhat to see that energetic person asleep by the fire, but it surprised her still more when his lips opened and words came from them—a drowsy rambling kind of speech.

"If that little gal could drive dogs—why she'd get tight away, sir. Reckon she's small enough to wriggle under tent. No noise in snow. Good dogs them when they ain't hungry—that's jest what O'Neill wants only he can't tell her—in twelve hours he won't be in the Force—then he won't have no blamed conscience. It's a fair fight, I guess."

She started in amazement and Rodd went on.

"Aye, put a few hours between him and her and it's done. Maybe he'd find her at Buffalo Lake afterwards—bound to go there——"

The significance of it took Marie's breath away. Was Rodd asleep? Certainly he looked as though

he was, and the speech had all the heaviness of sleep-talk. But as she looked she thought she saw an eyelid move in a strange fashion as though its owner was striving to get a glimpse of her face to see if she understood. Then O'Neill returned.

"I found it in the sleigh," he said. "Curious that I should leave it there."

Rodd awakened at the sound of the voice and stretched himself.

"Why I was nearly asleep," he said.

"Nearly!" ejaculated O'Neill. "You've been dead asleep for half an hour."

"Then it's time I was in bed. I'll go and get my bag. Good-night!"

"Good-night, Rodd!"

He turned to Marie and held out his hand, an action which surprised O'Neill. But not so Marie, who rightly interpreted it as a farewell. She hesitated, knowing that to grasp it would reassure him on a certain point. Then she seized it and wrung it warmly.

"Rodd seems perturbed to-night, Marie," said O'Neill. "He's a queer chap and feels things much more than he would lead people to believe."

"He is a good man," she said. "Shane, he love you verra much. He do anyt'ing for you. Perhaps he do more than you t'ink."

"I wish he could do something for me now, dear. But no one can help me. To-morrow, before noon, we shall enter Regina. Marie—am I doing right? Tell me with your own lips."

"Yes," she said softly. "So long as you are a policeman you play what you call 'the game.' But, *mon cher*, you look so—so ill."

"If to-day were only to-morrow, Marie, it might make all the difference. Ten miles to Regina—only ten miles between Heaven and hell."

She stopped his words with a swift soft kiss.

"Think not of to-morrow. To-night I am happy—yes, verra happy."

She looked it too. The firelight revealed her round face swept clean of cares. She seemed to be suddenly transfigured.

"Maybe you wish you had failed?" she queried.

"Yes. I have never failed before, but I would give ten years of life to go to Regina and report failure. That is the irony of the situation."

In the meantime Rodd was busy over the bank. He gave the dogs an extra feed to keep them satisfied and silent. Then, when the pulped fish had disappeared into their insatiable stomachs, he harnessed them to the sleigh, cut the bells from the harness and hitched the whole thing to a tree. The dogs snuggled down in the snow ready for any emergency.

He ransacked the sleigh, throwing overboard all the heavy useless articles, leaving merely food, a rifle, and some rugs aboard. As a last thought he set the head of the sleigh in the direction of Buffalo Lake.

"Lord, help me," he mused. "But ain't it nacheral for any guy to talk in his sleep."

Thereafter he went to bed and dreamed of weddings, court martials and what not, all mixed up in extraordinary fashion. He awoke early and walked over the bank. A little hiss escaped him as he noticed that dogs and sleigh had gone, and the new runner-tracks were in the direction of Buffalo Lake. He

went down to the tent and found O'Neill awake and kindling a fire.

"Morning!" he said cheerily.

"Morning, Rodd!"

"Starting early?"

"Yes—it's bad going from here to Regina."

"Usual hurry!"

"It's no hurry—we've plenty of time—get the fire going while I call Marie."

Rodd nodded and crouched down by the pile of brushwood while O'Neill stepped towards the tent.

"Marie!"

No reply.

A rap on the canvas followed and again there was no response. At length O'Neill opened the flap and peeped in. He started and looked back at Rodd.

"She's gone!" he ejaculated.

"What!"

"She's not here."

"Oh, she's round about. Couldn't sleep maybe."

O'Neill walked into the tent. He soon came out again and went flying up the bank. Rodd, having got the fire going, followed him. Together they surveyed the scene—the sleigh marks and the pile of gear thrown into the snow.

"Gee! She's made a getaway!" exclaimed Rodd, simulating immense surprise.

"We'll have to follow, Rodd."

"How? Are we going to race a fast team of daws through a foot of new snow. She's well over the horizon."

O'Neill sat down on a bundle. His expression was a strange mixture of disappointment and joy.

"We ought to get her," he said slowly.

"Yep—if you can get her before noon."

"Eh ! "

"Wal, ain't it clear. She reckoned you was clean mad with this idea of duty so she jest puts herself outside time. You won't be a policeman after noon, O'Neill. Five years is five years I guess, and not a minute longer."

O'Neill jumped up, walked about for a few minutes and came back to Rodd. A great transformation had taken place in him.

"Rodd, she's done just what I hoped she'd do. But I couldn't tell her."

"Nope, certainly not," agreed Rodd.

"What about you ? There's a prisoner escaped. Aren't you going to get her ? "

"How can I ? No, sir. I'm making Regina right now. As for a prisoner I ain't never seen one. It's snow blindness I've got, and darned badly."

Six hours later two very tired policeman walked into Regina. A clock struck twelve as they passed through the town. Rodd looked at his companion.

"It's a fine morning, *Mister* O'Neill."

"Gorgeous—but I want to be on the trail again."

"Where to ? "

"First to Buffalo Lake and then to St. Claire."

Rodd smiled to himself.

"You're a darn fine policeman, O'Neill, but I guess you'll make a rotten husband," he grunted.

"Why should I ? "

"You'll spoil her—like most men. One of these days you'll be coming back to don the scarlet tunic again."

"Very likely," said O'Neill. "Look. there's the barracks !"

CHAPTER XXV

PAYMENT IN FULL

THREE days later a small group of people were sitting round a camp fire outside the wigwam of Summer Moon on Buffalo Lake. One of these was Marie, who had reached the encampment two days before and was immediately given sanctuary by the kindly Indian girl. The others were Summer Moon herself, "The Fox that Flies" and a short fat man who was evidently not at ease there, and who periodically gazed down the trail as though in search of someone. Near the entrance to the wigwam a golden-haired boy of some eight summers, clad in buckskin breeches and wrapped round the middle with a blanket, was busily engaged in attaching a wooden engine to the hind quarters of a mongrel dog, who much resented the operation.

Marie turned her head and laughed as the animal suddenly leapt forward dragging the toy behind him and precipitating the boy into the snow. She rose to her feet and brought him nearer the fire.

"What's your name?" she queried.

"Jack."

"Jack—what?"

He gazed at her in perplexity and then at the calm expressionless face of the Indian girl.

"Hasn't he another name?" asked Marie.

Summer Moon shook her head. She seemed in no mood for conversation. For two days she and her brother had watched the trail for the sign of a figure who never came. But last night the new moon had been born and the "Fox that Flies" had prepared to rejoin his tribe in the far north, taking with him his sister and her small charge. Summer Moon had shown no such anxiety to be gone. Much as she wished to take the boy with her, she felt it was due to the "Red Head" to give him a day's grace, and she sighed as she thought of the parting that must take place when the white man came. "The Fox that Flies" was quick to interpret the slight sound that left her lips.

"Does my sister sigh for the white boy?" he asked.

"Is there not a brave among the Crees who will take her to wife and——"

Summer Moon silenced him with a proud look. Her brother shrugged his shoulders and pointed to the shadow of a tall pine, the top of which was but a few yards from the fire.

"When the ghost of the tree touches the fire we go," he said.

Summer Moon said nothing, but her eyes grew sad as she looked at Marie.

"This man—O'Neill," put in the fat stranger, "are you sure he will come?"

"Will a father not come for his child?" grunted the Indian.

"Is it his child?"

"No," said Marie promptly.

"Why do you say that?"

"There is no resemblance. Mr. O'Neill has hair lak'—what you call him—auburn. *Mais non*—it is not his son."

The boy gazed at her in astonishment.

"Yes—that's my fader," he said. "He bring me all dese toys he did. Is he coming to-day?"

Marie fondled his flowing locks. She was at a loss to understand the position. The fat man—Grant—had struck the camp the night before. He had proved himself to be an uncommunicative person. The only information she could get from him, was that he sought someone of the name of Jackson Gorringe, and that he believed O'Neill could give him valuable information. Whether his mission was to the said Jackson Gorringe's advantage or not she was unable to discover.

"You know Mr. O'Neill?" queried Grant.

"Yes."

"H'm! Member of the North West Police, eh?"

"No."

"But I understood——"

"He leave the police three days ago," said Marie.

Grant raised his eyebrows and then slowly nodded his head.

"Five years!" he muttered. "That would make it right."

"What you mean?" asked Marie.

"This fellow—Jackson Gorringe—was last seen in these parts five years ago. I reckon I'm on the right track."

He settled down to his pipe. Jack, tired of being fondled, leapt from Marie's arms and made for the

puppy who was still endeavouring to rid himself of the toy engine. A little later the "Fox that Flies" made a sign to his sister and the pair of them vanished into the wigwam.

"They're off," said Grant. "What are you going to do, Miss Lestrangle?"

"I wait—here," said Marie resignedly. "He say he will come—and he will. It snow verra hard las' night and maybe he find it difficult."

Grant sucked at his pipe in silence. Summer Moon came from the wigwam and approached Marie, her face very serious.

"We go to our people," she said. "But I leave the boy. Here are the things that were left by the white man. The heart of Summer Moon is sad for many moons have passed since she took the boy to her bosom. Will the white woman swear she will give to the white man the things that are his?"

"I swear on my—sister's grave," said Marie.

Summer Moon handed her a bundle of documents and a considerable sum of money in notes—the balance of the amount given her five years ago by O'Neill. She turned wearily and went back into the wigwam. Half an hour later she and her brother came forth ready for their journey. The parting was brief and tearless. The boy seemed too intent on the puppy and the toy engine to understand that Summer Moon's kiss was the last he would ever receive from her.

"My fader come soon?" he queried.

"Yes," said Marie.

Grant stared at her. Her presence in the camp was as great a problem to him as his was to her. The

departure of the Indians placed him in a difficult position.

"If O'Neill doesn't turn up before sundown I shall make for Regina and seek him there," he said. "We can't very well stay here on our own."

"Why not?"

"Well it doesn't seem sort of proper."

Marie sniffed in disgust at this thoroughly Eastern sentiment. Grant got on her nerves to an extraordinary degree. He acted as though he held some dreadful secret which had a great bearing upon the future of O'Neill. Tired of his company she left the camp and took Jack for a walk down to the lake. When she came back Grant was making ready to depart.

"I'm off," he said. "I've had enough of this infernal life. Six months I've been on this game. If I don't find O'Neill in Regina——"

He stopped as a figure came out of the pinewoods. Marie recognised it at once and ran towards it.

"Shane!"

"Marie!"

In a minute he stood holding her hands and looking into her glorious eyes.

"But I don't understand——"

"I will explain everyt'ing," she said. "But there is a strange man here who wants you."

"Wants me?"

"Yes. He wait for you since yesterday."

"What's his name?"

"Grant."

"Never heard of him—but I'm late. The snow held me up. Are the Crees here?"

She shook her head.

"Gone!—and the boy? They haven't taken the boy?"

"No—see—he comes now."

Jack came running through the snow, his toy train trundling behind him. He reached O'Neill and held out his arms.

"Fader!"

O'Neill caught him in his arms and glanced at Marie.

"He calls me that," he explained. "But it isn't true."

"I'm glad."

"Why?"

"Because—ah, just because——"

They met Grant by the fire. He touched his cap almost deferentially.

"Mr. O'Neill?"

"Yes."

"My name's Grant. I represent a private detective agency. I'm looking for a man named Jackson Gorringe."

"Jackson Gorringe!"

O'Neill's face grew taut. Marie stared at him in amazement, whilst Grant smiled triumphantly.

"Maybe you think I've got bad news, but it's good news—very good. I've come to find the new Earl of Lothane."

"The new Earl of Lothane," ejaculated O'Neill. "What nonsense is this?"

"Nonsense! It's true. Eight months ago Lord Wingrove and his son were killed in a railway smash. The title goes to the late Earl's nephew Jackson Gorringe. Have you ever heard of Jackson Gorringe, Mr. O'Neill?"

"I have," snapped O'Neill.

"Then maybe you could put me on his track ? "

O'Neill's eyes flashed. He looked at Marie and then at the boy on his shoulder.

"I can put you on the track of the new Lord Wingrove," he said. "He's looking at you now."

"Shane ! " ejaculated Marie.

"I knew it," said Grant. "Your hair gave you away, my lord—excuse me from saying it."

"My hair—my—great Scott ! You don't think I am——"

His simulated amazement took the breath out of Grant's sails. He looked at O'Neill's hair and then at his face.

"But you're Jackson Gorringer—ain't you ? "

"I'm not. Jackson Gorringer died five years ago."

"Jackson Gorringer was alive five years ago. I got that fact from a Scotsman named McMahon. He ran the trading post at 'The Forks.' That's the last anyone saw of him. But I had a clue——"

"Clue ! You don't need any clue now. You've found your man."

"But you said he was dead ! "

"I did. I also said the new Earl was looking at you—so he is. Jack, take a good look at this human sleuth-hound."

Grant almost jumped in his surprise.

"What's that ? "

"It's true," said O'Neill quietly. "Jackson Gorringer died on New Year's Eve five years ago. This boy is his son."

Grant rubbed his eyes.

"It complicates matters," he said. "I've got to have proof of his death."

"I can prove that—for I buried him myself."

"You—where ?"

"Up along the Saskatchewan. But you won't need to go up there. The documents that will prove his identity are here. At least—they were——"

Marie produced the packet of papers given to her by Summer Moon.

"Are these they ?"

"Yes." He handed them to Grant who swiftly perused them.

"These seem all right," he said, "but it's queer that you too should answer to the description I've got."

O'Neill laughed.

"Red hair isn't one man's monopoly. Anyway, I'm sorry if I've infringed his copyright. It never occurred to me that I might have masqueraded as the dead man and won an earldom. What a pity !"

Grant rubbed his nose with his forefinger and then grinned.

"Well, I never thought I should find an earl that size." He chuckled Jack under the chin. "And how is your lordship ?"

"What's he mean, fader ?" asked the boy.

"He's only playing, Jacko. But you know I'm not your real father. No. One day I'll explain. But how would you like to go in a big ship across the sea and live in a big house ?"

"And you too ?"

"Not now—perhaps later."

"And will Summer Moon be there ?"

"Not at once—she has to go on a long journey."

"Can I take my puppy and my engine?"

"Yes. And when you get there you will find lots of other toys and a horse of your own."

The boy clapped his hand at this piece of news.

"When can I go?" he whispered.

"To-morrow. This gentleman will take you."

Jack looked not so pleased at this, but his face brightened as he envisaged the future. Grant, pleased with his success, put on his most ingratiating smile and took the boy from O'Neill's shoulder. In half an hour they were staunch friends.

CHAPTER XXVI

CONCLUSION

“ **A**ND now ? ” said O’Neill.

They were standing by the shore of the frozen lake with the light of the setting sun turning the whole landscape to crimson.

“ I go to St. Claire,” said Marie softly. “ I wait here just to tell you how sorry I am to escape.”

“ Sorry ! ”

“ Yes.”

“ You mean you really wanted to face the music—to pay a terrible price for a crime that to me seemed justified ? ”

“ Yes. Then I come out one day, and you say you would wait——”

He seized her hands and kissed them.

“ But that’s all past. There shall be no waiting—no wasting of youth and beauty.”

To his surprise her eyes filled with tears and she turned her head away.

“ Marie,” he whispered. “ What’s the matter ? I never dreamed of finding you here. But you are here and now nothing shall part us again. That boy was my trouble. I did not know how to dispose of him. It was only when I heard the news that my—

that Lord Wingrove and his son were dead that I realised——”

She, looking at him steadily, gleaned the meaning of this.

“Then it was true,” she whispered, “you are Jackson Gorringe?”

“I was, but not now. For five years I have been Shane O'Neill, a man who unlike Jackson Gorringe has been, I believe, of some use in the world. I mean to remain O'Neill for ever.”

“Then that boy is a fraud.”

“Hush! It's his great chance in life. Do you think it can make any difference whether he is or is not the son of Gorringe? Environment is everything. I—I robbed him of a father—and have paid him back to the best of my ability unless they upset the claim, which will be difficult. As for me only one thing matters.”

“And that?”

“You, Marie. I meant to come to you when I had settled the question of the boy's future. Now that's fixed and nothing lies between us if—if you love me.”

“I love you, oh, so much,” she murmured, “and that is what makes it so hard.”

“I don't understand you.”

“It was because I love you that I wanted to pay the price. Shane, Shane, there's blood on my hands still. I t'ink that man was not fit to live, but I did not know how bad a t'ing it was I did until I began to love you.”

“But what difference does it make whether you suffer—unjustly—or not?”

“It make all the difference,” she said.

"Then why did you escape ? "

"I had no time to t'ink. They way was open and I go. Then when I come here I see it all clearly." She shuddered. "Last night I dreamed it all over again. But I wanted to stay and see you that you might understand."

"But I don't understand. Do you mean that for me and you there is no future ? "

"Only the future each of us may build. Shane, *mon cher*, if we married I should never forget that there was blood——"

He put his hand over her mouth.

"I won't have you say such things. Dell was a brute."

"It makes no difference," she said stubbornly.

He sunk his head appalled at this new situation. Her soft eyes surveyed him tenderly.

"I am sorry I ever came into your life, Shane, for I have ruined it."

"No. Whatever happens I shall never forget it was you who made it whole. But to live without you, Marie, is impossible. I had never dreamed of love in all those years of wandering. The Corps was my only thought."

"And now what you do ? " she asked.

"God knows. Even now I can't believe you mean what you say. I can't believe that you ever took a man's life."

"I did," she said, "and I was glad—but not now. Father André say that vengeance is God's, and now I know it is true."

"How did it happen ? " he asked. "I can't understand why you did it and not Pierre or Paul."

"On the night when my sister die they find a letter from Dell. My fader and brudders all go into the next room and were very silent. I creep in and find them throwing the dice. Then I know what they mean to do. So I take my chance too."

He looked at her in astonishment.

"I t'row highest," she explained. "Then they all try to stop me but, *mon Dieu*, I did not want them to think I was afraid. We quarrel verra much and at last I get my way. That night I went to the hut where Dell was. The other man—Rawlings was away. I——"

"I know the rest," interrupted O'Neill. "No more, please."

"But how you know?" she whispered. "We keep it verra secret."

"I knew that the person who killed Dell carried a wound in the side, and I found it on that night when I believed I had failed."

She nodded as she recalled the incident. O'Neill took from his pocket the weapon from which the shot had been fired.

"It was by the irony of fate that this weapon which saved my life furnished evidence. Better throw it away."

"But how you find out anything from this?" she asked.

"The size of the bullet—it is uncommon. The doctor extracted the bullet from Dell's body and sent it to Regina. That was all the evidence I had to work upon."

"But it is wrong. No, that man Flood he steal the revolver I used. I find this old one in a drawer when I come to rescue you."

He grasped her by the shoulders.

"Are you sure, Marie?"

"*Mais oui!* I take my fader's revolver and give it back to him later."

"But the doctor couldn't have sent the wrong bullet. I can't understand it at all. Marie, if it——"

He stopped as he realised that Marie was gazing at a figure on horseback coming up the trail at a terrific pace.

"It's—it's Paul," she ejaculated. "Yes, only Paul ride lak' that."

A few minutes later she was running towards the rider. He pulled up his mount, dragged her on to the saddle and laughed light-heartedly, as he rode on to where O'Neill was standing.

"So I find you, by Gar," he cried. "I go to Regina and nearly spoil everyt'ing by asking to see Marie. But they know noding of Marie and then I meet that funny policeman."

"Rodd?"

"Yes. He wink and say 'Buffalo Lake' and I come here. But why——?"

"I escaped," explained Marie as she dismounted, "and Shane—Mr. O'Neill—is no longer a policeman and cannot arrest me again."

Paul looked at O'Neill in a curious way, then his glance fell upon the revolver which the latter still held.

"Where you get that?" he asked.

"It's part of the evidence on which Marie was arrested. It was a bullet from that weapon which killed Jacob Dell."

"No," said Marie.

"Yes," put in Paul.

Marie shuddered.

"There's a mistake somewhere. You know, Paul, it was our fader's revolver that I took——"

Paul stopped her and looked at O'Neill intently.

"You believe Marie killed that beast?"

"No."

"Marie's face was the picture of absolute amazement.

"But just now you say——Oh, I do not understand. I tell you it was I. That revolver has noding to do with it."

"I think it has a great deal to do with it, Marie," put in O'Neill. "Perhaps Paul will tell you exactly why he was in such a hurry to reach Regina."

"I will," said Paul. "When I discovered what a mistake had been made——"

"Mistake!"

"Yes, one beeg mistake—I came to Regina to confess before it was too late."

"But what have you to confess?" asked Marie.

"I killed Dell," said Paul tensely. "I killed him with that revolver. On that night when you t'row the dice and persist in avenging Celeste I watched you go out. Then I make haste to get to the hut before you. I did not want you to know because you think it your duty, so I wait outside the window. I see you enter—by Gar! it was all so quick I am nearly too late. But I fire through the little piece of paper that was pasted over a hole in the glass. At that moment you fire and he fire back. At first I t'ink he hit you but you turn and run and I know you are safe——"

"But——" commenced O'Neill, and was stopped by a sign from Marie from which he understood that

she had kept her wound from the knowledge of her family.

"You were saying——?" queried Paul.

"Nothing. I was thinking how disappointed Marie must be."

Marie was looking far from disappointed. A new light had come into her eyes. Her whole being throbbed with intense joy as she realised that all barriers to love and happiness were swept away.

"I am so glad," she whispered. "I t'ink I was mad on that night, and ever since—until you come into my life, Shane."

He caught her hand and drew her close to him. Paul, quite *au fait* with the situation, looked towards the camp.

"I go feed my horse," he said, and promptly jerked his steed into action.

"What we do next?" queried Marie.

"The whole world lies before us. Soon the spring will come and the snow go. Flowers will bloom again and the woodland echo with song. But a few minutes ago it all seemed so black and hopeless and now the sun has burst from behind the clouds. Marie, tell me again you love me."

"I love you—by Gar—I love you."

She brought his head down and kissed him passionately on the lips.

"And Paul?" she whispered. "Is he safe?"

"I think so. Now that I have failed the matter will drop."

"Have you really failed?" she asked with a smile.

"Failed in one direction, only to achieve my greatest triumph in another."

"And when did you first begin to love me?"

"There was no beginning. Your image has been planted deep in my heart since the days of my childhood—a seemingly impossible ideal that I gave up all hope of realising. To think that I should have found you in the wilderness."

"One finds all things in the wilderness," she murmured. "It was there I found Trooper O'Neill. It is there we shall find our future home, my love."

The sun set on their two figures, outlined against the purple snow in a close embrace. Beyond them the smouldering camp fire broke into a triumphant flame. Down in Regina Barracks a score of troopers were discussing the late "body-snatcher" of the Corps.

"Well, one can't always remain infallible," drawled Fortesque. "Even O'Neill failed in the end."

"Failed!" snarled Rodd from his bed. "Failed! Why you elongated, unimaginative fish, O'Neill couldn't fail if he tried. Failed! Wal, I should smile!"

THE END.

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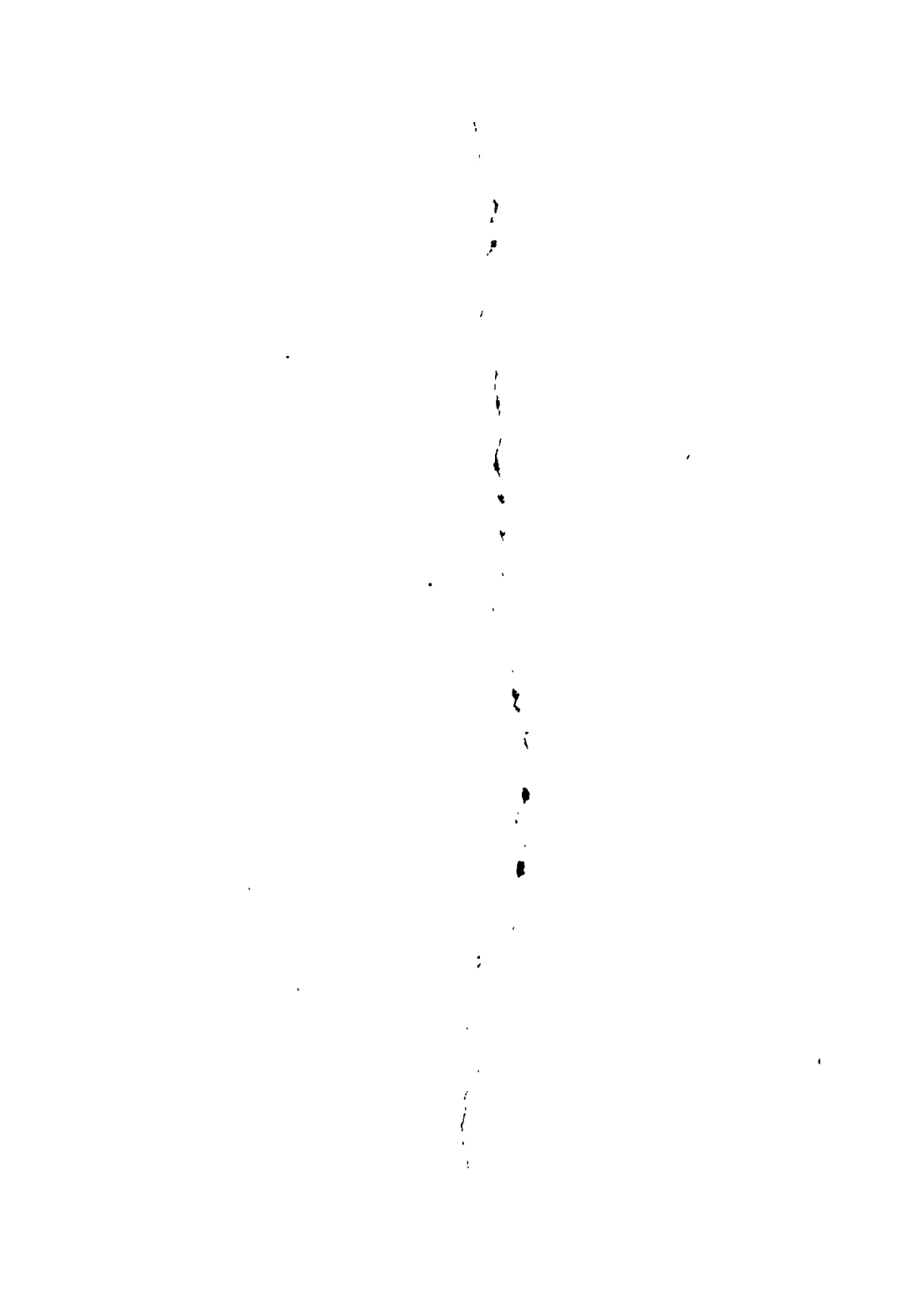
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